

DEGAS

A NEW VISION
MELBOURNE WINTER MASTERPIECES

Artwork labels

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Degas: A New Vision

This retrospective exhibition of the work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917), curated by Degas specialist Henri Loyrette, offers a new examination of this celebrated French artist's rich, complex and abundant career, which spanned the entire second half of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth.

While the Impressionism of Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley manifested the charm of working *en plein air* (out of doors), Degas (who called himself a Realist rather than an Impressionist) preferred to work in the studio and to study his models by artificial light. He was drawn to the effects brought about by lamplight, oil lamps and stage footlights rather than those of the sun and clouds. His Impressionist colleagues were primarily – and often solely – painters, but Degas was first and foremost a draughtsman, working with pencil, chalk, charcoal, gouache, watercolour and pastel. He reinvented the monotype which, along with printmaking and later photography, permitted him to make admirable bodies of work in black and white. In the 1890s, however, he gave himself over to what he called 'an orgy of colour'. He railed against those who set up their easels out of doors and yet created, in 1869 and again in around 1892, an incomparable group of landscape compositions.

Degas's art can be appreciated anew today as open-ended, 'a work in progress', rather than the sum of individual and isolated works. This is the distinctive genius of Degas, which makes him both a precursor of modern art in the twentieth century and particularly relevant today. *Degas: A New Vision* examines how in Degas's mature years he worked and reworked compositions in a fluid manner that made the process of making his art as valid a subject as narratives and observations of contemporary life had been earlier in his career.

Prologue

From his earliest days as an artist, Edgar Degas (1834–1917) experimented with a wide range of media. In the 1860s he sought to reconcile the teachings of both Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix to reinvent history painting and to illuminate, in the words of his art critic friend Edmond Duranty, ‘the fire of contemporary life’. Degas was preoccupied with subjects drawn from everyday life before these were taken up by Édouard Manet: horseracing, dance classes, laundry workers, the elegant night-life of the *café-concert*, and prostitution. He sought to add meaning to his portraits by placing his sitters in settings that indicated their professions and outlooks.

At the start of the 1860s Degas was still focused on creating elaborate and striking compositions destined for display at the Paris Salon in order to promote his career. However, his output soon became more open, fluid and continuous, a series of inexhaustible variations upon a single theme or gesture of the body. He did not find new horizons in exotic foreign travel, but rather through an ever deeper exploration of a few chosen motifs. His continual dissatisfaction or, as he put it, ‘a proper idea, not of what you are doing now but of what you may do one day’, drove him ceaselessly onwards. He measured his own progress in terms of new formats, technical innovation and experimentation, simplification of form and the rejection – indeed the impossibility – of what he called ‘exercises in precision’.

Edgar Degas: Self-portrait

Autoportrait

1857

etching and drypoint, third of four states

Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), Bibliothèque, Paris
Jacques Doucet Collection

EM DEGAS 18a

Edgar Degas: Self-portrait

Autoportrait

1857

etching and drypoint, third of four states

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
H.O. Havemeyer Collection,
Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929

29.107.53

While studying in Rome as a young man Degas became increasingly interested in printmaking and also in the portraits of Rembrandt, which he first saw in publications by the French art writer Charles Blanc. The effects of light and shadow in Rembrandt's portraits inspired Degas to undertake a series of self-portraits including this, his only self-portrait etching, which he produced in four separate states. He experimented with altering the appearance of these etchings through leaving varying amounts of ink on the plate before printing. Degas was very pleased with this exercise, and gave away examples of these trials to his friends.

**Woman holding a horse's bridle. Study
for Semiramis**

Femme tenant les brides d'un cheval.

Etude pour Sémiramis

1860–62

black crayon

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 15490

**Nude woman seen from behind,
climbing into a chariot**

***Femme nue, de dos, montant dans un
char***

1860–62

pencil

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 15486

**Nude woman standing, with left leg
raised, foot on a pedestal**

***Femme nue debout, la jambe gauche
levée, le pied sur un socle***

1882–83

black chalk and pastel on blue paper

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 29346

Female nude

Femme nue

1905

charcoal and brown pastel

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Gift of Mr. Noah Torno, 2003

2003/1670

Woman taken unawares

Femme surprise

c. 1892, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

414 E

Beginnings

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas belonged to an extended family that had branches in Italy and the United States, as well as France. His French-Italian father, Auguste, and Creole-American mother, Célestine, married in Paris in 1832 and Edgar was born two years later. Degas's father was a keen musician, as well as a collector of eighteenth-century French art, who maintained friendships with a number of serious art collectors; consequently the young Degas, who spoke both French and Italian fluently, was raised in an atmosphere of cultural and intellectual aspiration. In 1847 Célestine died at the age of thirty-two, when Edgar was thirteen years old. The eldest child, he had two younger brothers, Achille and René, and two younger sisters, Thérèse and Marguerite.

When Edgar was eleven he was enrolled in the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, a school for children of the upwardly mobile professional classes. There he learned Ancient Greek and Latin and also mastered the classics of French literature. On weekends his father regularly took the teenage Degas to visit distinguished private art collections across Paris. Despite his father's wishes that he study law, after graduating Degas was allowed to take private art lessons and in April 1855 he enrolled in formal classes at the École des Beaux-Arts (although he never completed his studies there). An introduction to the revered artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres at this time had a formative influence upon his commitment to both drawing and portraiture. Aside from himself, Degas's first models were his siblings and other family members.

René De Gas

1855

oil on canvas

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts
Purchased, 1935

SC 1935:12

Degas's family members were his principal models in the early years of his career. His first art lessons were undertaken with Louis Lamothe, a loyal follower of the Neoclassical master Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. This portrait of his younger brother René, the family darling, betrays Degas's resolve to follow in the footsteps of his mentor Ingres, whose work was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in September 1854. Degas visited the elderly master of Neoclassical portraiture in 1855, the year that he undertook this portrait. Preparatory drawings show that Degas radically simplified his composition, eliminating a complex interior setting in favour of a dramatic dark background reminiscent of the Mannerist Old Master, Agnolo Bronzino.

Thérèse De Gas

c. 1863

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 2650

At the start of the 1860s Degas's family still acted as his primary models for portraiture. In early 1863 he painted this engagement portrait of his sister Thérèse. He shows her as a young woman all dressed up to go out; in fact, to go abroad. Timidly she shows off her engagement ring before a view of Naples, her face serene, the sky blue with future happiness. She was to move to Naples after her marriage in Paris on 11 April 1863 to her first cousin Edmondo Morbilli, the son of Rose Morbilli, the sister of Degas's father, Auguste.

For Kids

This is a portrait of Edgar's sister Thérèse. The siblings were very close and often wrote letters to each other. This portrait was painted in 1863 when Thérèse was twenty-three years old and marks an important moment in her life. Can you see the ring on her left hand? She is engaged to be married. Over the years, Edgar continued to draw and paint portraits of Thérèse and her husband. Look for the portrait of the married couple in this exhibition.

Do you like to draw portraits of your family and friends?

Giovanna Bellelli

1860

charcoal, red-brown pastel and chalk on cream paper

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Bequest of Meta and Paul J. Sachs

1965.266

Thérèse De Gas

1855–56

pencil

Véronique and Louis-Antoine Prat Collection, Paris

The ineffable psychological qualities of Leonardo da Vinci's female sitters have infused this delicate pencil drawing of Degas's younger sister. Her watchful stillness recalls Leonardo's haunting portrait known as *La Belle Ferronnière*, c. 1490, with which Degas would have been familiar from the Musée du Louvre's collection.

Thérèse De Gas

c. 1855–56

black crayon and graphite on brown paper

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Julia Knight Fox Fund

31.434

Traces of Ingres's influence on the young Degas are clearly visible here in the clean, firm contours delineating the face of his then fifteen-year-old sister Thérèse De Gas. Offsetting the crisp edge drawn along her cheek is a subtle modelling of the chin and cheeks produced with smudged pencil, recalling the *sfumato* (soft or blurred) effects of Leonardo da Vinci.

Italy

Abandoning both his legal and art studies in Paris, Degas left for Italy in the summer of 1856, at the age of twenty-two. His father, Auguste, had agreed to fund an extended period of travel and study, albeit on a strict budget.

Stopping first in Naples, Degas stayed with his paternal grandfather, Hilaire, and renewed acquaintance with his first cousins Alfredo and Adelchi Morbilli (sons of his father's sister Rose; their elder brother, Edmondo, would later marry Degas's sister Thérèse). While Degas's father had adopted the French version of the family surname, De Gas, the Italian side of the family spelled their name Degas. Edgar himself would later adopt this Italian spelling of his surname.

Degas had left the École des Beaux-Arts without completing his studies and never applied for the state-sponsored Prix de Rome, whose winners were funded to travel and work in Rome for three years. Despite this, he participated in activities at the Académie de France's residence there, the Villa Medici, welcomed by its liberal director Jean-Victor Schnetz. Under Schnetz's influence Degas undertook sensitive studies of some of Rome's local residents, alongside his ceaseless copying after classical sculpture and the Old Masters. He now formed friendships with the professional painter and engraver Joseph Tourny, and with another student eight years his senior, Gustave Moreau. Moreau is credited with introducing the young Degas both to new schools of art (the Venetian colourists, and Eugène Delacroix, for example) and to experimental uses of watercolour, distemper and pastel.

Roman landscape, probably facing Monte Lepini, beyond the town of Velletri

1857

graphite on pink paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

93.208

Degas first encountered the landscape etchings of Claude Lorrain at the Corsini Gallery in Rome. They inspired some of his first landscape sketches, undertaken while travelling around Rome and southern Italy in 1856–57. This delicate *plein-air* drawing was made between Velletri, in the Alban Hills, and the Lepini Mountains near Rome, and records the region's distinctive low mountain ranges, marshes and coastal areas near the Tyrrhenian Sea. Degas was enchanted by this view. He wrote of Velletri with its 'sea of silvered blue ... amid the furrow of bronze of the marsh ... behind, the Appenines with the snow peaks'.

A woman in Abruzzese costume

1856–57

graphite

Collection of Jean Bonna, Geneva

In addition to male models who posed nude for life classes, the Villa Medici also provided, as studio models, women who posed in local costume such as those of the Abruzzi and Gaeta regions. Degas dashingly depicted them in graphite or watercolour. This was a recent practice, owed mainly to Jean-Victor Schnetz, director of the Académie de France in Rome at the time of Degas's sojourn in that city.

Roman beggar woman

Mendiante romaine

1857

oil on canvas

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Purchased, 1960

Lent by Birmingham Museums Trust

on behalf of Birmingham City Council

1960P44

This work is both a portrait and a genre scene, but it leans towards the former in that there is little trace of narrative, local colour or exotic reference. Degas details the marks of old age, fatigue and poverty – wrinkled skin, gnarled hands, the motley garments of a pauper – along with the faded colours that he recorded in a contemporary notebook: ‘figure of an old woman / very tanned skin, white veil / cloak thrown over / shoulder faded brown / faded green dress / a little like the back wall / of my room / yellow apron’.

For Kids

Edgar visited Italy to study when he was twenty-two years old. His father told him to paint as many portraits as he could, so Edgar went to museums and copied works of art by Italian masters such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian. Edgar has painted this woman gazing into the distance in the way that the masters used to paint the saints. However, instead of depicting an angel, he has chosen a poor peasant woman. She is holding a walking stick and wearing many layers of clothing.

Look at the different patterns and fabrics that Degas has carefully painted.

Study of a reclining male nude

Etude – Homme nu couché

1856–58

graphite on cream paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Purchase funded by the Brown Foundation
Accessions Endowment Fund

89.248.1

In the late 1880s Berthe Morisot recorded that ‘Degas said that the study of nature was worthless, since painting is an art of conventions, and that it was infinitely better to learn to draw from Holbein’. Degas’s love of the Old Masters of the Italian and other schools was to affect his approach to form and composition throughout his life. This drawing and the adjacent *Study of a reclining male nude*, while probably drawn from life at the Villa Medici in Rome, also reflect his study of Italian masterworks in their obvious referencing of both Andrea Mantegna’s and Annibale Carracci’s ‘Dead Christ’ compositions.

Study of a reclining male nude

Etude – Homme nu couché

1856–58

graphite on cream paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation

Accessions Endowment Fund

89.248.2

Portrait of a woman (after a 16th-century Florentine drawing)

Portrait de femme, d'après un dessin florentin du XVI^e siècle

1858

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Purchased 1967

15222

A sixteenth-century drawing from the Uffizi, *Portrait of a woman*, formerly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, was the origin of this magnificent oil portrait, which is both a copy and an independent portrait. Degas first copied the 'Leonardo' sanguine chalk drawing in graphite. Then he began a new copy in oil on canvas. This was a stylistic exercise in the best sense of the term: a subtle variation, of the kind so much appreciated in the nineteenth century, on an old theme; putting himself (as he thought) in Leonardo's place, Degas brought to completion what the master had merely sketched.

**Head of an old man, front on (after
Lorenzo di Credi)**

***Tête de vieillard de face (d'après
Lorenzo di Credi)***

c. 1860

pencil with touches of white gouache

Galerie Berès, Paris

Young boy's profile (copy after Pinturicchio's Funeral of Saint Bernadino)

Profil de jeune garçon (d'après les Funérailles de Saint Bernardin de Pinturicchio)

1857–58

watercolour

Galerie Berès, Paris

Degas delighted in the works of the early Italian painters, commonly known at the time as 'primitives', which he encountered in the churches and collections around Rome, Florence and Naples. This profile portrait of a youth is taken from a figure in the fresco by Pinturicchio in the Bufalini Chapel, Rome, depicting the life of St Bernardino of Siena. The medium of delicate watercolour in itself recalls the parched and chalky surfaces of fifteenth-century frescos. Degas produced three colour studies of this youth. One Degas scholar, Felix Baumann, has noted Degas's attraction to portraits by past masters in which the sitter's features resembled his own, and suggests that such images functioned to some degree as self-portraits.

Marguerite De Gas

1860–62

soft-ground etching and drypoint, third of six states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

NQD-005154

Marguerite De Gas was the artist's younger sister, born in 1842. After training as a singer, in 1865 Marguerite married an architect, Henri Fèvre, and moved to Buenos Aires, where she died in 1895.

The engraver Joseph Tourny

Le Graveur Joseph Tourny

1857

etching on Japanese vellum, only state

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

H. O. Havemeyer Collection.

Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

29.107.55

Joseph Tourny was a French watercolourist and printmaker working in Rome who specialised in copies after Old Master paintings. An irritable character, Tourny claimed to have only a limited love for the art of etching. His skills and friendship were nevertheless appreciated by Degas, who was in search of techniques for emulating his new hero Rembrandt. Here Degas has depicted Tourny in a Rembrandtesque beret. The small image of a monk's head in the margin of the plate is known as a *remarque*, a small personalised motif added by the artist.

Adelchi Morbilli

c. 1857

graphite

Private collection

Adelchi Morbilli

c. 1857

graphite

Collection of Jean Bonna, Geneva

The clannish nature of the extended Degas family is clear from the numerous portraits which Degas made of his many relatives in Paris and Italy, and later in New Orleans. Taken together they convey the leisured gentility of the large family and their collective indulgence of the young Degas's artistic vocation. Adelchi Morbilli was both Degas's cousin and, later, the brother-in-law of Degas's sister Thérèse. These two portraits of Adelchi record Degas's determination to master the mode of intimate pencil portraiture, perfected by Ingres and later by Louis Lamothe. They are an exercise in showmanship, in which the draughtsmanship transitions from a finely rendered face towards a schematic treatment of the body, dwindling to a solitary graphite line.

Hilaire Degas

1857

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 3661

Hilaire Degas, the patriarch of the sprawling Degas clan, was eighty-seven years old when he summoned his grandson Edgar to his summer villa outside Naples, at San Rocco di Capodimonte. Despite their difference in age, the painter and his grandfather, a retired stockbroker and banker, shared an interest in art. In what was perhaps a joke between them, Degas based the general pose of this portrait of his grandfather on Titian's *Pope Paul III and his grandsons* at the local Museo di Capodimonte, illustrating the deference of youth towards old age and wisdom. Degas has shown Hilaire as a man of sophisticated restraint, at ease in his severely masculine surroundings, the fabrics of his clothes and furnishings a sombre harmony of earth tones and stripes.

History painting

Degas returned to Paris in early 1859, and soon moved into a new Paris studio at 13 rue de Laval in the 9th arrondissement. He continued to copy after Old Master paintings in the Louvre, while developing a number of history paintings of a scale and subject suitable for submission to the annual Salon, which then still provided the major exhibiting opportunity for emerging artists. Stories from the Old Testament and scenes from daily life in ancient Greece and of conflict in the Middle Ages would be worked upon until early 1865, when his highly idiosyncratic *Scene of war in the Middle Ages*, 1865, became his first painting to be accepted for display at the Paris Salon, where it was largely ignored.

After 1865, however, Degas completely abandoned history painting. No doubt his reasons were partly strategic; he must have thought that, since even so radical a version of history painting had been overlooked, he might be better received if he submitted portraits or scenes of modern life to subsequent Salons, as indeed he did. Above all, he had by now understood what he continued to affirm throughout his life: that one could, with the right treatment of the everyday, give it the breadth and ambition of history. He did not so much deny the importance of the subject as claim that there were no insignificant subjects; the rest was the business of art.

Alexander and Bucephalus

Alexandre et Bucéphale

1859–60

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Bequest of Lore Heinemann in memory of
her husband Dr Rudolf J Heineman

1997.57.1

It was through the exploration of historical scenes such as this that Degas ironically engaged in his first forays into the depiction of daily life, *la vie moderne*. In *Alexander and Bucephalus* we can trace the origins of Degas's later passion for depicting the horse in drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture. The source for this narrative of the young Alexander the Great taming the wild horse Bucephalus comes from Plutarch's 'Lives' – thus making *Alexander and Bucephalus* what Degas specialist Richard Brettell has aptly called 'a Realist historical painting', entirely in keeping with Degas's later preoccupation with horseriding and horseracing as Realist contemporary subjects for art.

Alexander holding the reins of Bucephalus and study of a bent left arm

Alexandre tenant les rênes de Bucéphale et étude de bras gauche plié

1859–60

pencil

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre
Collection Olivier Senn.
Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.161

A chief aim of ambitious young French artists returning from Italy was to demonstrate their new grasp of history painting through direct contact with the Antique. Degas would have seen the large group sculpture depicting the conquest of the young Alexander over the wild horse Bucephalus on the Quirinal Hill in Rome. Alexander tamed the horse by guiding it towards the sun so it could not be frightened by its own shadow, and by discarding his fluttering cloak. Degas's infatuation with horses dates from his early years in Italy, when he copied numerous equestrian subjects by earlier masters.

Alexander and study of a leg

Alexandre et étude de jambes

1859–60

ink and pencil

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre
Collection Olivier Senn.
Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.184

Seated man, three-quarter rear view
Homme assis trois quarts dos

1859–61

pencil

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre
Collection Olivier Senn.
Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.163

**Seated man, three-quarter rear view,
hands together**

***Homme assis trois quarts dos, deux
mains réunies***

1859–61

pencil

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre

Collection Olivier Senn.

Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.148

**Adolescent nude, right hand on hip, left
hand raised**

***Adolescent nu, main droite posée sur la
hanche, bras gauche levé***

1856–58

pencil

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre

Collection Olivier Senn.

Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.154

This life study was made in the 'evening academy' at the Villa Medici, which had since Ingres's directorship (1835–40) been open to anyone who wished to work there and not only to the enrolled students of the Académie de France in Rome. The hospitality of this class was much appreciated at a time when good life models were extremely hard to find. The evening class also made regular training possible, facilitated contact between artists – it seems likely that Degas met Gustave Moreau there – and occupied the long winter evenings when the early arrival of darkness made it impossible to work late in the city.

Young Spartan girls challenging boys
Petites filles spartiates provoquant des
garçons

c. 1860

oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection

1961.334

Study for The young Spartans exercising

Étude pour Jeunes Spartiates s'exerçant à la lutte

c. 1860–61

oil on paper on paper on cardboard

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Friends of the Fogg Museum, Alpheus Hyatt,
William M. Prichard, and Francis H. Burr Memorial Funds

1931.51

On returning to Paris from Italy in 1860 Degas began work on scenes from the Bible and ancient history, including this preparatory oil sketch for a vignette from an ancient Greek subject. In the foreground two groups of adolescents are seen confronting each other on the plains of Sparta, watched over by the white-haired law-giver Lycurgus and the teenagers' mothers. The subject has conventionally been read as the exercises traditionally undertaken by Spartans in preparation for war, but it has also been suggested that it represents Spartan courtship rites. In the *Life of Lycurgus* it was noted that displays of physical prowess by girls assisted young men in choosing strong mothers, who would produce strong children.

Degas's father listening to Lorenzo Pagans playing the guitar

Le Père de Degas écoutant Lorenzo Pagans

after 1874

oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Bequest of John T. Spaulding

48.533

At the height of the fashion for all things Spanish, the Catalan-born tenor Lorenzo Pagans became a great favourite of the *grande bourgeoisie*, entertaining his audiences with songs of his motherland and accompanying himself with guitar or tambourine. Here the elderly Auguste, Degas's father, is shown listening with rapt attention in his apartment at 4 rue de Mondovi. Such scenes were also often attended by Manet, who liked to sit on the floor beside the piano. Monsieur De Gas discouraged any interruptions to the musical programs and would call the performers and his guests to order with the words: 'My children, we are wasting precious time'.

For Kids

Edgar and his father, Auguste, both loved music, and musicians often visited their home and played songs. This painting depicts Lorenzo Pagans, who was famous for playing Spanish songs in the bars of Paris during the 1860s. Behind Lorenzo you can see Auguste listening to the music. The two men were great friends and Auguste would often organise concerts like this one at his house.

What kind of music do you like to listen to?

Lorenzo Pagans and Auguste De Gas

Lorenzo Pagans et Auguste De Gas

1871–72

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 3736

Years after the deaths of both the Catalan musician Lorenzo Pagans and his father, Auguste, Degas took friend and art connoisseur Paul Poujaud into his bedroom to show him this painting. Poujaud recalled Degas's surprising lack of sentimentality about the picture: 'He showed me the precious painting hanging above the little iron bedstead ... I'm sure that he did not show me the Pagans in memory of his father, whom I never knew and of whom he had never spoken, but as one of those completed works he admired above all others. On that point, I have not the slightest doubt'.

Monsieur Ruelle

c. 1861

oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon

B1726

In this portrait of Monsieur Ruelle, Degas shows his father's former bank cashier as a man of seriousness and restrained sophistication, dressed in a dinner suit and black bow tie as if preparing to go to the opera. In its combination of informality and masculine severity the portrait conforms to a convention among nineteenth-century Realist artists of portraying each other and their friends as modern men of leisure and the metropolis.

Portrait of a young woman

Portrait de jeune femme

1867

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 2430

The Bellelli family

In 1858–59, during his Italian sojourn, Degas stayed in Florence for nine months with his aunt Laure and her husband, Baron Gennaro Bellelli. There he embarked on the largest painting he would ever create – a monumental portrait of Laure, Gennaro and their daughters, Giovanna and Giulia. A study of marital discontent presented on the scale of a history painting, *Family portrait* (*Portrait de famille*), also called *The Bellelli family*, reflected Degas's recent study of the dignified sitters in the Flemish master Anthony van Dyck's early seventeenth-century portraits, which he had seen in Genoa. He worked on this painting continuously after his return to Paris, completing a final version of it for the Paris Salon of 1867. Alive to the unhappy marital dynamics between Laure and her husband, a political exile from Naples, Degas showed his morose relatives in their rented apartment, physically separated from one another by items of furniture and Giovanna (on the left) and Giulia. Although expecting her third child, Laure Bellelli (la Baronne) stands proud and aloof, in full mourning for her recently deceased father (Degas's grandfather) Hilaire Degas, whose portrait hangs on the wall behind her. Meanwhile, her husband, conspicuously not in mourning, sits in comfort by the fire. Adults and children are compressed into a shallow plane, an airless, static vacuum. The uneasy ambience is accentuated by Giulia's absent leg and the family dog, shown without its head, in the right foreground.

Giovanna Bellelli, study for The Bellelli Family

1860

pencil, black chalk and gouache

Véronique and Louis-Antoine Prat Collection, Paris

Degas's preparations for his early masterpiece of the Bellelli family were meticulous and painstaking. He made a large number of preliminary studies over an eight-year period, and their variety is astonishing. They range from the rather pedestrian recording of details to the gloriously finished and inspired. These drawings played a critical role in the evolution of the painting. Even this drawing, largely a study for Giovanna Bellelli's clothing, is developmental, as Degas continued to tweak the smallest details as he worked towards the finished painting.

Family portrait, also called The Bellelli family

Portrait de famille

1867

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 2210

For Kids

Edgar often visited Italy because members of his family lived there and he was inspired by Italian art. This is his family portrait of his uncle Gennaro and aunt Laure Bellelli and their two daughters, Giovanna and Giulia, then aged ten and seven. Some people think this painting is Edgar's first masterpiece. In preparation for it, Edgar drew many sketches of each family member alone before placing them all together in this painting.

Do you have any family portraits at home?

The Bellelli sisters (Giovanna and Giulia Bellelli)

Les Soeurs Bellelli (Giovanna et Giulia Bellelli)

1865–66

oil on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California
Mr and Mrs George Gard De Silva Collection

M.46.3.3

While Degas was struggling to complete his monumental study of the Bellelli family, he undertook this additional portrait of his cousins Giulia and Giovanna, probably during their visit to Paris for the wedding of Degas's sister Marguerite. The two sisters, shown as young girls in *The Bellelli family*, are here portrayed as teenagers. Giovanna, on the left, appears to be about seventeen years old, and her sister fifteen. The sisters are still wearing half-mourning dresses, following the death of their father, Gennaro, in May 1864. The influence of daguerreotype photography on this double portrait has been noted, as well as the different personalities of the sitters – one bolder, the other shy.

For Kids

Do you recognise these two young women? They are Edgar's cousins Giovanna and Giulia, who are both depicted in the portrait named *The Bellelli family*. The sisters are dressed differently in this painting because they are older. Now that they are young women they have begun to dress more like their mother. Instead of wearing pinafores, they now wear floor-length dresses, and even corsets!

Do you like to play dress-ups and wear adult clothes?

Edmondo and Thérèse Morbilli

c. 1865

oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Gift of Robert Treat Paine, 2nd

31.33

The marriage of Thérèse De Gas to her first cousin Edmondo Morbilli was a love match requiring a papal dispensation that failed to bring the happiness that both expected. In this poignant painting Degas shows the couple after the miscarriage of their much-anticipated child, depicting them physically close but in a pose of frozen stillness. The husband's expression of bleak resignation gives him the patrician air of a Renaissance nobleman. Detailed realism in some areas of this double portrait and lack of finish in others are deliberately counterbalanced – an effect that heightens the picture's disturbing and ambiguous atmosphere.

Portraiture: 1860s and 1870s

In 1862, while copying paintings by Old Masters in the Louvre, Degas made the acquaintance of Édouard Manet. Although Manet was a regular exhibitor at the Paris Salon, he was recognised nonetheless by many younger artists as a leading opponent of the Salon's commitment to outmoded and archaic subject matter and conservative painting styles. Manet seemed to embody the progressive motto of *il faut être de son temps* (being true to one's time) that was being championed by devotees of Realism in contemporary painting, and Degas also adopted this commitment to contemporary subjects depicted in a Realist manner.

A network of artistic and musical friendships now developed for Degas against the backdrop of the 9th arrondissement's musical and performance venues, cafes and artists' ateliers. The Café Guerbois was a regular haunt. Here Degas joined in artistic and literary discussions with Manet and a group of young fellow artists opposed to the traditional Salon – Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro and Frédéric Bazille – writers and poets such as Émile Zola and Théodore de Banville, the photographer Félix Nadar and critics Edmond Duranty and Théodore Duret. Musical friendships were established in this period with Désiré Dihau, a bassoon player with the Paris Opéra, and his pianist sister Marie Dihau; and Lorenzo Pagans, a Catalan composer, guitar player and former tenor with the Paris Opéra who performed frequently at musical evenings organised by Degas's father and the Manets. In the 1860s and 1870s

Madame Camus at the piano

Mme Camus au piano

1869

charcoal and black chalk

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre

Collection Olivier Senn.

Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.166

The woman in this study is Degas's friend Madame Camus, an accomplished musician and the wife of a doctor whom Degas met through Manet. This drawing – the only full-length preparatory sketch for a painted portrait that Degas submitted to the 1869 Salon – shows Madame Camus turned away from the piano with her feet on an embroidered cushion. At the time Degas was preoccupied with the challenge of conveying mood through light. He noted the need to 'work a great deal with the effects of evening, lamps, candles, etc. The provocative thing is not to show the source of light but the effect of light'.

Interior (Piano with open fallboard) *Intérieur (piano avec partition ouverte)*

1869

charcoal heightened with pastel on brown paper

Musée d'Art moderne André Malraux, Le Havre

Collection Olivier Senn.

Donation Hélène Senn-Foulds 2004

2004.3.107

This drawing explores in greater detail Madame Camus's living room at 34 rue Godot-de-Mauroy, in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, and relates to the portrait drawn in charcoal displayed adjacent here. A talented pianist, Madame Camus regularly performed at the musical evenings held throughout the 1860s by Degas's father, Auguste. Degas explores here the fall of light on Madame Camus's piano, adorned with items from her husband's collection of Meissen porcelain figurines, and on a stack of musical scores to the right.

Study for Julie Burtey

c. 1867

hard and soft graphite with touches of chalk

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Bequest of Meta and Paul J. Sachs

1965.254

This drawing is a study for the painted portrait of Julie Burtey now held in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, United States. The exact identity of the sitter remains unknown, as the inscription on the drawing is readable either as 'Julie Burtey' or 'Julie Burtin'.

Study for Madame Théodore Gobillard (née Yves Morisot)

1869

graphite on buff tracing paper on paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, David T. Schiff Gift,
and Gifts in memory of Joseph Thomas, 1984

1984.76

Madame Théodore Gobillard (née Yves Morisot) was the sister of the Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot. The Morisot and Manet families were very close, and the Morisot sisters regularly attended the weekly musical evenings organised by Édouard Manet's wife, Suzanne. It was at one of these evenings that they probably first met Degas. Yves's mother Madame Morisot wrote at the time this drawing (a study for a painting now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) was created: '[Degas] is going to transfer the drawing that he is doing in his sketchbook onto the canvas. A peculiar way of doing a portrait!'

**Édouard Manet seated, turned to
the right**

***Édouard Manet assis tourné vers
la droite***

1864–65

etching and drypoint, first of four states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-27729

Édouard Manet, seated, holding his hat

c. 1868

graphite and black chalk on Chinese paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Rogers Fund, 1918

19.51.7

In the 1860s Degas wrote a reminder to himself to 'make portraits of people in typical, familiar poses, being sure above all to give their faces the same kind of expressions as their bodies'. In a note perhaps acknowledging the artist's private feelings towards the friends and relatives he depicted, Degas added: 'There are, of course, feelings which one cannot convey ... how many delicate nuances to put in'.

Horse at trough

Cheval à l'abreuvoir

1867–68, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

395 E

There are few instances where Degas used his figures sculpted in wax as direct models for his paintings and pastels. However, a rare exception is *Horse at trough*, which has a clear relationship with the *Portrait of Mademoiselle Eugénie Fiocre in the ballet The Spring*. The sculpted animal displays precisely the same posture as the painted one and there is some indication of a similarly raked floor. Due to this relationship, this sculpture is also one of the few that can be precisely dated. Degas's first forays into sculpture in the 1860s were exclusively of horses.

Horse walking

Cheval en marche

probably before 1881, cast 1919–32
bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

405 E

Alice Villette

1872

oil on linen

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Gift of C. Chauncey Stillman, Class of 1898, in memory
of his father, James Stillman

1925.7

The bold confidence of this composition, which reduces the sitter to an object in an interior scheme, reveals the artist's growing interest in creating settings that have a character of their own. Here Degas's friend Alice Villette is portrayed in front of a window in his studio in rue Blanche. The striking red shawl and black lace headdress in which she is dressed may be props that Degas, who collected such accessories, asked her to wear. Similar details appear, for example, on the motherly female figure in his contrived ballet rehearsal scenes, painted in the same period.

Woman with field glasses

Femme à la lorgnette

c. 1869

oil on cardboard

Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

2601

For Kids

In the mid 1800s racecourses were great places to see your friends and to be seen, so Parisians always attended in their finest clothes. This woman wearing a ruffled lace gown and hat is looking through her binoculars. Because she is standing up and finely dressed, we assume she is watching a horserace but she could also be 'people watching'. Perhaps she is keeping her eye on someone special in the distance.

Do you have a favourite outfit that you like to wear on special occasions?

Girl looking through field glasses

Femme à la lorgnette

c. 1869

oil and pencil on paper on canvas

Lent by Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf of
Glasgow City Council: from the Burrell Collection with
the approval of the Burrell Trustees

35.239

The startling motif of a woman staring out at the viewer through field glasses was one that tantalised Degas, and he toyed with including such a figure in a racecourse scene but later over-painted it. The powerful and assertive gaze of modern young women was depicted by many artists at the time, and was found variously shocking or erotic by contemporary audiences. Degas gave versions of this composition to his friends James Tissot and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, prompting the theory that it represents Emma Dobigny, a model known by all three men.

**Portrait of Mademoiselle Eugénie
Fiocre in the ballet The Spring
*Portrait de Mlle. Eugénie Fiocre:
à propos du ballet La Source***

1867–68

oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, New York
Gift of James H. Post, A. Augustus Healy,
and John T. Underwood, 1921

21.111

In the spring of 1867 Degas embarked on his first ballet picture with this scene from the ballet *La Source*, its music by Léo Delibes, which premiered in 1866. The principal dancer was Eugénie Fiocre, who played the princess Nouredda. In this memorable production, live horses appeared on stage and a real, hydraulically operated stream flowed from an artificial mountain. The writer Émile Zola noted fretfully of the painting, which was shown at the 1868 Salon, that it resembled a group halting by a river rather than a ballet scene, but admired its strange elegance: ‘I thought of Japanese prints’, he wrote, ‘and the artistic simplicity of their colours’.

**Nude study: Mademoiselle Fiocre in the
ballet *The Spring***

***Etude de nus: Mlle Fiocre dans le ballet
La Source***

1867–68

oil on canvas

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
Gift of Paul Rosenberg and Co., 1958

1958:2

Portrait of a woman

Portrait de femme

c. 1876–80

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1937

409-4

The identity of the woman in this oil sketch has long been elusive. The plump yet delicate features of the model are painted with speed and confidence with an almost calligraphic use of dilute black. The sitter wears a lace headdress similar to that worn by Alice Villette in the portrait painted in the artist's studio. Her resemblance to the 'stage mother' in Degas's ballet scenes is noteworthy, suggesting that she might also have served as a model for Degas's larger ensemble pieces. This study has been painted directly over another portrait of a woman. Recently conserved, the painting has also been rehoused in a Degas-designed frame.

**Madame Jeantaud on her chaise
longue, with two dogs**
***Mme Jeantaud sur sa chaise longue,
avec deux chiens***

1877

oil on canvas

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe

2493

Berthe Marie Jeantaud was the wife of Charles Jeantaud, with whom Degas served in the artillery company under the command of Henri Rouart in 1870–71, during the chaos of the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune. Following Berthe Marie's marriage to Jeantaud in 1872, Degas produced this as well as a second portrait of her. Her cousin was Vicomte Ludovic Lepic, a landscape painter and etcher who taught Degas methods of manipulating plate tones in his monotypes. In this remarkably candid and economical oil sketch, Degas depicts Madame Jeantaud at home with her two small dogs at 24 rue de Téhéran.

Henri Rouart and his daughter Hélène

Henri Rouart et sa fille Hélène

1871–72

oil on canvas

Courtesy of Acquavalla Galleries

So cordial were Degas's relations with Henri Rouart and his brother Alexis, who was also an art collector, that he dined with Alexis on Tuesdays and Henri on Fridays. In 1906 Degas wrote to his sister Thérèse that the Rouarts were his only remaining family in France. This portrait of Henri with his daughter Hélène was the first of many portraits. Henri is seen here as a paterfamilias, head of his household (a role that Degas esteemed) and in front of one of his landscapes, which Degas also admired enough to invite Henri to exhibit with the 'impressionists'.

Henri Rouart in front of his factory

Henri Rouart devant son usine

c. 1875

oil on canvas

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh
Acquired through the generosity of the
Sarah Mellon Scaife Family

69.44

This painting portrays Henri Rouart, who was Degas's fellow student at the elite Paris college Lycée Louis-le-Grand. A successful engineer and pioneer in refrigeration, Rouart was also a landscape painter and art collector. The two men met again in the army during the Franco-Prussian War, when Degas was a lieutenant under Rouart's command. Rouart became a co-exhibitor and supporter of the Impressionists and Degas took to dining frequently at the Rouart home. In this painting Rouart is shown not as an artist but as an affluent, top-hatted industrialist in front of his ice works factory, which Degas visited in Louisiana.

Portrait of a man

Portrait d'homme

c. 1866

oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, New York
Museum Collection Fund

21.112

Among Degas's circle of Realist painters were some outstanding practitioners of still life, a genre that enjoyed a resurgence of popularity following the revival of interest in the French eighteenth-century painter Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin. The identity of the man in this portrait is unknown, although he seems to be a still-life artist. He is depicted by Degas in his studio, informally seated with hands clasped, surrounded by the standard props of his trade: hunks of meat, white cloths, glassware and sketches of past still lifes displayed on a wall as *aides-mémoire* – a masculine counterpart to the portrait of Victoria Dubourg that is also displayed here.

Victoria Dubourg

c. 1868–69

oil on canvas

Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio
Gift of Mr and Mrs William E. Levis

1963.45

Victoria Dubourg was a friend of Degas and a painter of still lifes who exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon. As she poses in this painting, Dubourg scrutinises Degas at work with the forthright interest of a professional equal. Degas pays particular attention to her clasped hands in recognition of the fact that she too works with her hands, while the bouquet on the mantelpiece serves as a further allusion to her occupation as a painter of still lifes. The empty chair indicates the absence of the painter Henri Fantin-Latour, Dubourg's adored fiancé and occasional collaborator.

Landscapes: 1860s

Degas always disagreed with the importance assigned to landscape by the Impressionists, and their exaltation of painting in the open air – *sur le motif*. Along with the critic Charles Baudelaire, Degas deemed his generation too ‘herbivorous’ and avoided open-air painting due to the weakness of his eyes and their susceptibility to bright light. Above all, he rejected an instinctual form of painting constrained by the rendering of ‘impressions’. He argued that if one could take notes on nature – tracing the overall lines of a landscape, accompanying them with colour indications, specifying a few morphological and botanical details – it was in the isolation of the studio, working from memory, decanting one’s sensations and calling upon one’s imagination that the painting was at last resolved.

In the second half of the 1860s Degas laid out his position. The racing scenes and a series of pastel landscapes he created in 1869 clearly defined the role that landscape would thereafter play in his work; however, this development was only reached after a survey of all the various possibilities, some of which are displayed here. The singular (and unfinished) *Dead fox in the undergrowth*, 1861–64, and *Horses in a meadow*, 1871, are unique in Degas’s corpus. In 1869 the artist created the first of three series of landscapes, comprising more than forty pastels. It would be twenty years before he returned to the genre, in 1890–92, and again in 1896–98.

Beach at low tide

Plage à marée basse

1869
pastel

Private collection

Degas's disdain for *plein-air* landscape painting was well established when, in 1869, he surprised his acquaintances with a suite of small landscapes that he produced in pastel during a holiday in Beuzeval, on the Normandy coast. Their precise purpose remains obscure, though it has been speculated that Degas intended them for the London market (the same market towards which his friends Édouard Manet and James Tissot were also orienting themselves). Drained of incident and reduced to nearly complete abstraction, such studies recall the abstract beach sketches made by Degas's friend James Abbott McNeill Whistler in Trouville, Normandy, four years earlier.

Landscape

Paysage

1877–79

monotype

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

93-B-130413

Landscape

Paysage

1877–79

monotype

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

93-B-130412

Horses in a meadow

Chevaux dans la prairie

1871

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Chester Dale Fund

1995.11.1

In the spring of 1871, during a stay in Normandy to escape the events of the Paris Commune, Degas painted this scene of two horses standing in a landscape that is largely devoid of Impressionist charm. The terrain is bare, while on the river three boats with smoking chimneys introduce a note of industry into this rural corner. It is perhaps an agrarian and proletarian version of Degas's equestrian landscapes.

Dead fox in the undergrowth

Renard mort, sous-bois

1861–64

oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Réunion des Musées Métropolitains,
Rouen, Normandie

1990.5.1

While his colleagues exhibited *plein-air* landscapes as 'Impressionists', Degas adhered to his position as a 'Realist' during the 1860s and 1870s, with at times awkward results. *Dead fox in the undergrowth* displays the powerful sense of physical presence that can be achieved by studying a dead fox in a studio under artificial light, and by using a brush to render the fox's luscious thick pelt. Less convincing is the forest setting, which is invented and only roughly blocked. Here Degas applied thin slashes of green and brown paint to suggest trees and forest floor, emulating, some have suggested, the Realist technique of Gustave Courbet.

Racecourses: 1860s

Horseracing was Degas's first recurrent modern subject, and preceded his dance classes and opera scenes. In 1861 Degas visited M  nil-Hubert in the Normandy countryside, the family estate of his old school friend Paul Valpin  on, situated near to the Haras-le-Pin stud and the Argentan racecourse. The recreational sports of horseracing and the steeplechase now offered him scope for exploring contemporary narrative painting. In pre-mechanised Europe, horses were as ubiquitous as the car is today. They were an essential part of life, whether for work or pleasure, and Degas was accordingly fascinated by these magnificent creatures. They feature in his earliest sketchbooks when he carefully copied equestrian subjects after the Parthenon frieze sculptures and the Italian Old Masters Paolo Uccello and Benozzo Gozzoli; and he continuously drew, painted and sculpted horses until his death.

Degas's approach to depicting horses embodies his lifelong methodology. He studied and copied how they were represented by specialist *animalier* artists, as well as by the Old Masters, and he spent many hours observing and examining them. How he portrayed horses changed over time and his earliest works reveal a slightly tentative and clich  d manner as he struggled for perfection. As his art evolved, his images of horses became more innovative and remarkable: he attained great precision in their appearance yet the rendering remained tactile and lively. He also perfectly captured the physical relationship between rider and horse through all the different poses they struck, whether at rest or in full flight. Few artists have reproduced the grace, power and elegance of horses as well as Degas.

Racehorses (Study for Scene from the steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey)

c. 1881

charcoal on light brown paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon

1999.79.9

The sport of steeplechasing became a favourite among the French upper classes in the mid nineteenth century, leading in 1863 to the formation of the Society of Steeplechases. The fact that the jockeys were gentleman amateurs made the dangers of the sport one of intense interest to the rich. It was this interest that Degas counted upon when he produced a large-format painting of racecourse tragedy, *Scene from the steeplechase: The fallen jockey* (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), which he showed at the Paris Salon of 1866. Begun in that year, the painting was reworked by Degas in 1880–81 and c. 1897.

Fallen jockey (Study for Scene from the Steeplechase: The fallen jockey)

c. 1866

graphite on blue paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon

1999.79.6

Head of the fallen jockey (Study for Scene from the steeplechase: The fallen jockey)

c. 1866

black chalk heightened with white on brown paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon

1999.79.7

This drawing is a study of the most finished detail, the injured rider's head, in Degas's heroically scaled scene of a contemporary tragedy, *Scene from the steeplechase: The fallen jockey* (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), which was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1866. The startlingly deathly quality of this head recalls the studies of decapitated heads by Théodore Géricault, an artist to whom Degas continually referred to in this era. Degas's painting received a mixed reception in 1866. One visitor described it as being 'somewhat in the English style', for its evidence that Degas had not yet mastered equine anatomy: 'Like the jockey, this painter is not yet entirely familiar with the horse'.

At the racecourse (The races)

Sur le champ de courses (Les Courses)

1861

oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum, Basel

Gift of Martha and Robert von Hirsch 1977

G 1977.36

On returning to France in 1859 Degas resumed his friendship with school friend Paul Valpinçon and commenced a lifelong pattern of spending summers with the Valpinçon family at their grand estate at Ménil-Hubert in Orne, Normandy. After the parching heat of Italy, the lush and moist countryside of Normandy delighted him. Degas wrote that he imagined the landscape to be 'exactly like England with small and large pastures enclosed with hedgerows, wet paths, some ponds, green and umber'. This composition is among Degas's earliest paintings of equine subjects. It reveals his hesitancy in depicting horses' legs in motion, an effect that he eventually mastered.

Excursion on horseback

Promenade à cheval

1867–68

oil on canvas

Hiroshima Museum of Art

Excursion on horseback echoes Degas's visits to the château of Ménil-Hubert in the Normandy countryside, the family estate of his friend Paul Valpinçon situated near to the Haras-le-Pin stud and the Argentan racecourse. In *Excursion on horseback* he is particularly fascinated by what the French called *amazons*, women riding side-saddle, as well as the introduction of children to the equestrian arts at a very young age.

Out of the paddock (Racehorses)

Les chevaux de courses

c. 1871–72, reworked c. 1874–78

oil on wood panel

Private collection

First ballet works: 1870s

While the friendships he established in the 1860s with musicians such as Désiré Dihau, a bassoon player with the Paris Opéra, brought Degas into the orbit of ballet performances in the French capital, the full extent of his access to this world prior to the mid 1880s remains unknown. This may explain why his many depictions of dancers practising backstage in rehearsal rooms in the 1870s were his own studio inventions rather than accurate depictions of the Opéra's *foyers de la danse*. Degas's favourite theatrical venues – the Opéra in the rue le Peletier that was destroyed by fire in October 1873 and its replacement, the Palais Garnier, which opened in 1875 – were both located in the 9th arrondissement, close to his studio.

Degas exhibited ballet compositions at the 'impressionist' group exhibitions from 1874 onwards, all the while resisting the label, arguing that his own art was Realist and meticulously crafted in the studio instead of spontaneously created before nature. When the Galeries Durand-Ruel began acquiring Degas's paintings in 1872, the artist's first sales at this time were of ballet subjects. Unlike the romantic perspective through which these scenes are viewed today, Degas's contemporaries recognised in them a rejection of the surface glamour of ballet's front of house in favour of a serious study of the gritty reality of life backstage. There, junior impoverished dancers jostled for attention from their trainers, all too frequently prostituting themselves on the side so they could afford to stay in competition for coveted stardom.

The Ballet Master

Maître de danse

c. 1872

graphite and black chalk with stumping on buff paper,
squared in charcoal

The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
Gift of Robert Sonnenschein, II

1951.110A

The Ballet Master

Maître de danse

c. 1872

watercolour and oil paint with graphite and touches of pen and brown and black ink on buff paper ruled at centre in charcoal on Japanese paper

The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
Gift of Robert Sonnenschein, II

1951.110B

These two sketches of a *Maître de danse* were once thought to depict Louis Mérante, ballet master at the Paris Opéra in the rue Le Peletier. Mérante can be seen instructing dancers in the painting displayed in this room, *Rehearsal hall at the Opéra, rue Le Peletier, 1872* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). These drawings are now believed to represent Jules Perrot (shown in the adjacent drawing with more formality), who is portrayed here by Degas with a slight touch of caricature.

The Ballet Master, Jules Perrot

Le Maître de ballet

1875

oil on brown paper

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania
The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection
in memory of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986

1986-26-15

From his debut in 1830 until his retirement in 1860, Jules Perrot was the most prominent male dancer working throughout Europe. He was principal dancer at the Paris Opéra from 1830 to 1834, choreographer and ballet master at the London Opera from 1842 to 1848, and ballet master at the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg from 1849 to 1860. After his return to Paris in 1861 he became an 'unofficial' presence at the Opéra in the rue Le Peletier, where his friend Louis Mérante was ballet master, offering private coaching to principal ballerinas. Degas shows him here giving directions to a dancer.

For Kids

Jules Perrot was a well-known ballet master living in Paris. In this sketch Jules is sixty-five years old. When he was a young man, he was a very successful dancer and choreographer – that's a person who makes up dance routines. He fell in love with a ballerina named Carlotta Grisi, and composed many dances just for her. Jules's dance career took him to many places like England, Austria, Italy and Russia.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Rehearsal hall at the Opéra, rue Le Peletier

Le foyer de la danse à l'Opéra de la rue Le Peletier

1872

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 1977

'Monsieur Degas is a cruel painter. He has been visibly stirred by the pain concealed beneath the tinsel: he shows us little dancers with indigent arms, the fat old man who ambles amidst these little nymphs and who excels at "protecting" the beginners, the excessive smile of the singer who, pressing her bouquet to her chest, comes forward to thank her avid public. He knows all the scars of precocious vice; he has a feeling for disguised hideousness, and he will be, if he wants to be, a formidable caricaturist.'

PAUL MANTZ, 1877

The dance rehearsal

La Répétition au foyer de la danse

c. 1870– c. 1872

oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.
Gift of anonymous donor, initiated 2001,
completed 2006

2001.014.0001

‘We do not know exactly why Monsieur Degas has classed himself amongst the impressionists. He has a very distinct personality, and within the group of so called innovators, he stands apart. He is an observer, a historian perhaps ... Monsieur Degas’s compositions are sparse and disordered: his frame cuts figures in two and deliberately reduces them to the state of fragments. His talent includes some negligences which are perhaps artifice; Monsieur Degas abounds in irritating paradoxes. The notion of disconcerting the bourgeois is one of his most constant preoccupations.’

PAUL MANTZ, 1877

The little fourteen-year-old dancer

La Petite danseuse de 14 ans

1879–81, cast 1922–37

bronze with cotton skirt and satin ribbon

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves,
Alberto Alves Filho and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

426 E

At the 1881 ‘impressionist’ group exhibition Degas unveiled a large wax sculpture of an immature ballerina (of which this is a bronze version), which he provocatively clad in real clothing. Critics were scandalised, accusing him of having dredged ‘the lower depths of dance’, choosing his dancer from among the ‘most hatefully ugly’ and making of her ‘the very type of horror and bestiality’. They recognised Degas’s subject as a street urchin who performed sexual favours offstage. Degas’s model, ballet student Marie Van Goethem, the daughter of a tailor and a laundress and part-time prostitute, was later to abandon her dance studies and disappear into Paris’s underworld.

Dancer adjusting her shoe

Danseuse rajustant son chausson

early 1880s

charcoal and pastel

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Gift of Linda and Ronny Finger

2012.275

A ballet dancer in position facing three-quarters front

c. 1872–73

graphite, prepared black chalk, white chalk and touches of blue-green pastel on pink paper, squared in prepared black chalk

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Bequest of Meta and Paul J. Sachs

1965.263

Degas's exploration of new subjects from daily life in the 1870s was accompanied by technical innovations, in particular the use of pastel and the creation of monotypes. His taste for experiment was shown not only in the new procedures that he adopted but also by the increasing complexity of the supports and mediums that he used. Degas increasingly turned to papers of different colours – chamois, beige-pink, bright pink and resonant greens and blues – employed graphite and charcoal side by side with white gouache highlights, exploited the transparency of his new essence technique, and painted on canvas, paper remounted on canvas, board and panel.

Little girl practicing at the barre

c. 1878–80

black chalk and graphite heightened with white chalk on pink paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
H. O. Havemeyer Collection,
Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

29.100.943

Known as *les petits rats* (the little rats), trainee ballerinas in the 1870s entered the profession as young as six years of age. Many of them came from working-class backgrounds, nominated by their families for purely monetary reasons. Their working regimen was harsh, involving intense training for six days per week. On this study of one such hard-working child dancer, Degas made annotations for future reference: '*bien accuser / l'os du coude*' (emphasise the elbow bone); and '*battements à la seconde / à la barre*' (battements in second position at the barre). Battements are movements made by a ballerina's free leg, as she stands supported upon the other leg.

New Orleans

In October 1872 Degas travelled to New Orleans in the United States, where he stayed for five months with his late mother's brother Michel Musson and the extended Musson family. The artist's younger brothers René and Achille had already relocated there, and had opened a wine import business financed by the Parisian Degas family's bank. During his stay in Louisiana, Degas painted *A cotton office in New Orleans*, 1873, displayed here, which reflected his observations of the industry central to that city.

This now celebrated painting, which became the first work by Degas to enter a public collection when acquired by Pau's Musée des Beaux-Arts in 1878, depicts Michel Musson in the foreground sampling cotton fibre in the office of his cotton export business. René and Achille De Gas appear as relaxed visitors – René reading a newspaper and Achille casually observing the other men at work – in this complex group portrait of fourteen men, which has echoes of the artist's love of seventeenth-century Dutch guild portraits (such as Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Draper's Guild*, 1662, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). *A cotton office in New Orleans* was the prototype for many of Degas's works of the 1870s and 1880s: framing that cuts to the heart of the subject and slices through men and objects alike; a de-centred composition viewed from slightly overhead, with a steep, diagonal perspective; a depth of field that creates close-ups while miniaturising anything farther off; and contrasts provided by light sources and, more particularly, by the frequently reproduced backlighting effect.

The song rehearsal

La Répétition de chant

c. 1872–73

oil on canvas

House Collection, Dumbarton Oaks,
Washington D.C.

HC.P.1918.02.(O)

In New Orleans in 1872, Degas noted that ‘the lack of an opera is a real privation’ and his desire for musical engagement (‘I need music so much’) was not satisfied by public performances. However, impromptu musical interludes in the home of his uncle Michel Musson, such as that pictured here, surely provided pleasant relief from the heat and harsh light of the American South. *The song rehearsal* also reflects the experiments with pictorial space, compositional staging and orchestrated pose and movement that had featured in the ballet paintings Degas had completed just prior to his departure for the United States.

Cotton merchants in New Orleans

Marchands de coton à la Nouvelle-Orléans

1873

oil on linen

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Gift of Herbert N. Straus

1929.90

In December 1872 Degas wrote from New Orleans to Henri Rouart: 'One does nothing here, it lies in the climate, nothing but cotton, one lives for cotton and from cotton'. Two months later he wrote that he was working on his painting of the cotton office of his uncle Michel Musson, and also preparing another picture, which we see here, that was 'less complicated, and more spontaneous, better art, where the people are all in summer dress, white walls, a sea of cotton on the tables'.

A cotton office in New Orleans

Un bureau de coton à la Nouvelle-Orléans

1873

oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau

878.1.2

On 18 February 1873 Degas wrote to his friend the painter James Tissot: 'I have attached myself to a fairly vigorous picture ... In it there are about fifteen individuals more or less occupied with the precious material [cotton] ... A raw picture if ever there was one and I think from a better hand than many another'. Degas anticipated, incorrectly, that the natural market for this painting would be Manchester, Great Britain, where much of the processed raw cotton produced in New Orleans was shipped for the gargantuan textiles industry in the north of England, and where enormously wealthy new art patrons could be found.

For Kids

Edgar's mother, Célestine, once lived in New Orleans, a city in the United States. In 1872 Edgar visited his American family and painted this group portrait at his uncle Michel's cotton office. It is a busy day and you can see men at work inspecting fluffy cotton at the table. Edgar's uncle is examining cotton from his seat and Edgar's brother René is reading the newspaper. Achille, Edgar's other brother, is leaning against the wall.

When he wasn't painting, Edgar loved learning English words. One of his favourites was 'turkey buzzard'. Do you know any French words?

The pedicure

Le pédicure

1873

oil and essence on paper on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 1986

The young girl being attended to by a chiropodist in this painting is believed to be Joe Balfour, daughter of Degas's widowed cousin Estelle Musson, whose husband had been killed in 1862 during the American Civil War. Degas's brother René subsequently married Estelle Musson. Degas here uses a technique he invented, *peinture à l'essence* (which entailed using oil pigments with most of the oil blotted away, thinned out with turpentine). Applied like watercolour, it dried with a soft matt finish that Degas preferred to the glossy sheen of traditional oil paintings.

Courtyard of a house (New Orleans, sketch)

Cour d'une maison à la Nouvelle-Orléans

1873

oil on canvas

Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen

Bequest to the Danish government in 1951

238 WH

The partially finished state of *Courtyard of a house (New Orleans, sketch)* reflects Degas's experiences in the city, as he struggled to fulfil social obligations with his American relatives. As he wrote to James Tissot in November 1872: 'Nothing is as difficult as doing family portraits ... To persuade young children to pose on the steps is twice as tiring. It is the art of giving pleasure and one must look the part'. The view here looking out from a shaded interior also indicates that Degas was already experiencing problems with his eyesight, which was affected by the harsh Louisiana sunlight.

Interior

Intérieur

1868–69
oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania

The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986

1986-26-10

Degas ironically referred to this painting as 'my genre picture', by which he understated the gravitas of this domestic scene. This drama of seeming violation perpetrated on a young working-class woman by a man displaying the clothing and posture of a young bourgeois acquired in Degas's hands the breadth and intensity of history painting. The muted colours and dim light accentuate the unspoken violence, anguish and simmering tension between the two people. The open box on the round table at the centre of the painting is a telling symbol of lost virginity. The rosy interior of the gaping jewel-case is brutally explored by the lamp standing next to it.

Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Paintings Gallery

Mary Cassatt au Louvre; la peinture

1879–80

etching, soft-ground etching, aquatint and drypoint,
intermediate between fifteenth and sixteenth of twenty
states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-79017

The talented Pittsburgh-born artist Mary Cassatt quickly won Degas's respect for her talent and he invited her to participate in the 'impressionist' exhibition of 1877, shortly after their first meeting in her Montmartre studio. Degas famously declared: 'I will not admit that a woman can draw like that!' The two artists became occasional collaborators, most notably on a journal of original prints called *Night and Day* which never eventuated, and for which this etching is thought to have been made. It is often noted that the dramatically cropped view of Cassatt and her companion makes this one of Degas's compositions most influenced by Japanese art.

Nudes: 1870s

In 1875 Degas returned to etching, exploring its rich possibilities. For the next five years he relentlessly sought mastery of this process, which he had practised relatively little until that time. He combined a taste for *bricolage* (tinkering) with a love of the 'fine proof', and probably embraced the commercial aspect of this art more than has been acknowledged because he was then in financial difficulties. His choice of the female nude as a principal subject may also have been related to his wish to create a 'saleable' product. From this point on, working in black and white became the obsession of his life.

By July 1876 – when Degas had become, in the words of his printmaker friend Marcellin Desboutin, 'a plate of zinc or copper blacked up in printing ink' – he had fully developed the monotype, creating some of his most beautiful works in this technique. To realise a 'drawing made in thick ink then printed' – he preferred this description to the term 'monotype' – Degas used two methods: 'dark background', in which some of the ink with which the metal plate had earlier been covered was removed with the aid of a cloth, and 'light background', which involved drawing directly onto a blank plate with the aid of a paintbrush and printer's ink. *The tub*, 1876–77, is an example of a dark monotype, while *Getting dressed*, 1880–85, employs the light background technique.

Leaving the bath

La Sortie du bain

c. 1879–80

electric crayon, etching, drypoint and aquatint, seventh of twenty-two states

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Purchased 1976

18662

Degas was fascinated by new techniques, and delighted in adding to the possibilities offered by etching; a medium in which a metal plate is covered with a protective coating which is then scratched through with a needle to create an image prior to immersion in an acid bath which ‘etches’ the design. While fossicking one day in Alexis Rouart’s factory, Degas found a carbon rod from an arc lamp and saw in it a potential substitute for the traditional etching needle. Liking the silvered effect and slightly feathered texture that the carbon rod brought to his etchings, Degas adopted this alternative needle from then on, calling it an ‘electric crayon’.

Woman leaving her bath

Sortie du bain

c. 1880

monotype

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-87762

Getting dressed

Le Lever

1880–85

monotype

Collection of André Bromberg, Paris

The tub

Le Tub

1876–77

monotype

Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), Bibliothèque, Paris
Jacques Doucet Collection

EM DEGAS 4

Cafés-concerts: 1870s

The time that Degas spent overseas in New Orleans made him surprisingly nostalgic for everything he had left behind in Paris. The simple reason he gave was that 'One loves and gives art only to the things to which one is accustomed'. Although delighted by the new sights and sensations he experienced in New Orleans, he felt that 'new things capture your fancy and bore you by turns'. With these words, Degas expressed what would become his credo for the rest of his career.

After this time Degas refused invitations to travel to exotic locales and put aside the search for new subjects, focusing instead on the same themes: dancers, jockeys, women in the bath. The novelty of what he had discovered in America, though it gave rise to important works, also led him soon afterwards to retreat into himself, seeking inspiration in introspection. For Degas the exotic could be found perfectly well at home, especially in the new evening venues of 1870s Paris, the *cafés-concerts*. He delighted in exploring the tension and psychological preparation that lay behind the surface glamour of stage performances conducted within an artificial other-reality.

Actresses in their dressing rooms

Loges d'actrices

1879–80

etching and aquatint, third of five states

Bibliothèque nationale de France

Behind the safety curtain (A café-concert singer)

Derrière le rideau de fer (Chanteuse de café-concert)

1877–78

aquatint, drypoint and scraping, only state

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

NQD-009973

At the Café des Ambassadeurs

Aux café des Ambassadeurs

1879–80

etching, soft-ground etching, drypoint and aquatint, third of five states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-28661

Located a few hundred metres from the Palais Garnier opera house in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, the Café des Ambassadeurs was a restaurant and nightclub, or *café-concert*, which reached its height of popularity from the 1870s to the 1890s. Decorated in eighteenth-century Rococo style, the venue attracted both aristocrats and artists. The musical acts were based on popular forms, and featured stock characters designed to provoke tears or laughter. The disorderly ambience was heightened by flickering gas lights, an effect which Degas conveys with chaotic scratchings on the etching plate and through the application of varying intensities of ink.

Mademoiselle Bécát at the Café des Ambassadeurs

Mlle Bécát aux Ambassadeurs

1877–78

lithograph, only state

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-79019

Ostensibly produced for ready sale at a time of financial hardship, Degas's lithographic evocations of the cafe and brothel, the bohemian side of Paris nightlife, were difficult subjects for audiences in every sense. Here the subject is the famous chanteuse Emilie Bécát performing at the Café des Ambassadeurs, an outdoor nightspot of fin de-siècle Paris. Bécát was known for her frenzied performances with uplifted arms and extended fingers, commonly referred to as her '*style épileptique*'.

In a café (The Absinthe drinker)

Dans un café (L'absinthe)

1875–76

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 1984

This notorious painting of a woman stupefied by the toxic beverage absinthe (known as the 'green fairy') was produced by Degas in his studio with the cooperation of an actress, Ellen André, and a printmaker friend, Marcellin Desboutin. The picture was immediately condemned as a disreputable scene from the Café de la Nouvelle Athènes in Place Pigalle, a well-known bohemian drinking hole, and the reputations of André and Desboutin were harmed, to their dismay. The jolting sense of candid reality in Degas's scene owes much to the unconventional, angular viewpoints of Japanese prints, and demonstrates his maxim that 'no art is less spontaneous than mine'.

Studies of a singer

Etudes de chanteuse

c. 1878–80

charcoal and black chalk with touches of white chalk on
greenish-grey paper

Richard and Mary L. Gray and the Gray Collection Trust, Chicago

0280001

Female torso

Torse de femme

c. 1885

monotype in brown ink on Japanese paper

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCB-05968

**Woman rubbing her back with a
sponge**

***Femme se frottant le dos avec une
éponge***

c. 1900, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

408 E

Ballet and theatre: 1870s and 1880s

In the 1870s Degas wrote to a collector friend, Albert Hecht: 'Have you the *power* to get the Opéra to give me a pass for the day of the *dance examination*? ... I have done so many of these dance examinations without having seen them that I am a little ashamed of it'. From the records of the Opéra archives it seems that Degas only obtained a formal backstage pass for the premises in 1885.

Ironically, by this time he had already created his series of monotypes based on *La Famille Cardinal* (*The Cardinal Family*) (1883), the bestselling novel by his school friend Ludovic Halévy which examined illicit liaisons at the Opéra, where young, poorly paid trainee dancers often became sexual prey for wealthy Parisian gentlemen. Two of these monotypes, showing *abonnés* (subscribers with backstage access) hovering in corridors and at dressing-room doors, are displayed here.

Between 1885 and 1892 records show that Degas attended the Opéra on 117 evenings. In the first flush of joy at receiving his access pass, he visited the Opéra fifty-four times in 1885 alone. However, as much as Degas loved French grand opera – its music, its scale, the obligatory ballet and the grandiose spectacle it provided – his attendance tapered off when its musical repertoire changed. After the Paris Opéra in the early 1890s abandoned an entire generation of composers, such as Gioachino Antonio Rossini and Giacomo Meyerbeer, and turned its attention to Richard Wagner, Degas never set foot there again.

The dance class

École de danse

c. 1873

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection)

2014.79.710

The rehearsal

La Répétition

c. 1874

oil on canvas

Lent by Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf
of Glasgow City Council: from the Burrell Collection
with the approval of the Burrell Trustees

35.246

While this work and the adjacent painting are both ostensibly based on direct observations of dance rehearsals at the Paris Opéra in the rue Le Peletier, their different treatments of architecture hint at the degree to which Degas constructed their compositions from memory. Both paintings share the same radical cropping of the spiral staircase at left connecting the stage level to the rehearsal room, down which the disembodied limbs of young ballerinas descend. In the background to the right of this painting the celebrated dance instructor Jules Perrot can be seen.

For Kids

Edgar liked to sketch people on their own, and then later combine them in his paintings. Can you see the lady wearing the black bonnet who is tying the dancer's ribbon? This is Sabine, Edgar's housekeeper. Sabine probably wasn't at the rehearsal; instead Edgar added her in, a bit like cutting and pasting. Someone who would have attended rehearsal was ballet master Jules Perrot. He is the man in the red shirt standing in the distance, watching the ballerinas practise their poses.

Do you like to dance?

On stage I

Sur la scène I

1876

soft-ground etching and drypoint, second of five states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-80943

Related to Degas's love of the intimacy of theatrical life backstage are works that seek to capture the audience's experience of the performance itself. *On stage I* encompasses Degas's love of the ballet, his many friendships with musicians, regular visits to the Opéra's rehearsals and his fascination with artificial light. By placing the viewpoint in the front row, immediately behind a vivid mass of partially seen musicians' heads and the top of a double bass instrument, Degas immerses the viewer completely within the experience of the performance.

On stage III

Sur la scène III

1876–77

soft-ground etching, drypoint and roulette, third of five states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

NQC-031482

Ludovic Halévy talking to Madame Cardinal

Ludovic Halévy parlant à Mme Cardinal

1880–83

monotype

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-28678

**The one who looked around most
avidly was the Marquis Cavalcanti**
*Celui qui tournait le plus, c'était le
marquis Cavalcanti*

c. 1880–83

monotype

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1974

P2-1974

The opening chapter of Ludovic Halévy's novel *La Famille Cardinal* (*The Cardinal Family*) (1883) introduces the reader to the greed and amorality of Madame Cardinal and her ballerina daughter, Virginie. When Virginie abandons a wealthy suitor, Monsieur Paul, for a penniless actor, Madame Cardinal breaks off that worthless relationship and happily watches as other rich men circle around her daughter backstage at the Paris Opéra. An Italian aristocrat, the Marquis Cavalcanti, is soon ensnared, and encouraged to set himself and the whole Cardinal family up in a new apartment where he can cheat on his wife with Virginie under the 'protective' eyes of her mother.

Theatre box

La Loge

1880

pastel and oil on cardboard on canvas

The Lewis Collection, Houston

When exhibited at the fifth 'impressionist' group exhibition in Paris in 1880, this pastel attracted the attention of the critic Charles Ephrussi, who wrote glowingly of how it showed 'a profound knowledge of the relations between tones, producing the most unexpected and curious effects: the wine-coloured draperies of the spectators' box and the yellowish glow of the footlights are projected onto the face of a diminutive theatre-goer, who thus finds herself illuminated by violet and brilliant yellow; the impression is strange, but captured with perfect reality'.

Two dancers in a rehearsal room
Deux danseuses, effet de gris

1877–78

aquatint, drypoint and scraping, only state

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

NBC-22573

Theatre box

La Loge

1885

pastel

Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
The Armand Hammer Collection,
Gift of the Armand Hammer Foundation

AH.90.22

In contrast with his numerous ballet works, Degas produced relatively few studies of the spectators at the Opéra and other theatrical venues. *Theatre box* is one of his most captivating studies of the magical effects created by artificial stage lighting. Its contrast between the shadowy reality of the viewer in her dimmed theatre box and the vividly illuminated fantasy being performed before her onstage is as compelling as it is radical.

Dancers (Fan design)

Danseuses, éventail

1879

gouache, pastel and oil paint on silk

Tacoma Art Museum, Washington State
Gift of Mr and Mrs W. Hilding Lindberg

1983.1.008

Dancers (Fan design) belongs to a group of fans made in the late 1870s that reflect Degas's fascination at this time with Japanese art. Highly aestheticised, these fans show how Degas took advantage of this unusual format to explore new compositional possibilities. Here, for example, the balletic action taking place on stage competes for the viewer's attention with the theatre's screening machinery, as well as with the group of black-clad *abonnés* (subscribers with backstage access) gathered in the wings in the middle distance.

For Kids

In the 1850s trade opened up between Japan and the rest of the world. Before then, people living in Europe thought that Japan was a mysterious place. In Paris, dozens of shops started selling Japanese tea, silk fabrics, trinkets, lanterns and paper fans. Fans were fashionable at the time and many women would carry one as an accessory. The faraway land of Japan and Japanese woodblock prints inspired artists like Edgar, and he began to paint beautiful paintings on silk in the shape of fans.

Some of Edgar's paintings include fans. How many can you spot in this exhibition?

Dancers on the stage

Danseuses sur la scène

c. 1899

oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon
Jacqueline Delubac Bequest, 1997

B1997-29

Dancers on the stage looks back to the experiments with pictorial space and *repoussoir* compositional staging that had so characterised Degas's ballet works of the 1870s and early 1880s. *Repoussoir* was a favourite device for Degas, a technique in which an object placed prominently in the foreground of a work serves to emphasise the recession of physical space in the rest of the composition. In an unusual choice for the artist, Degas shows here a dress rehearsal on stage. The attention of the dancers is focused upon the diminutive figure of the dance master in the far left background, whose presence ignites a diagonal magnetism that animates the whole painting.

Brothel scenes: 1870s

From 1876 Degas undertook monotype studies of sex workers in Parisian brothels. While the theme was also common in contemporary French literature, prostitution in Degas's work entirely lacks the lascivious perspective brought to the subject by many French writers of the late nineteenth century. The monotype, with its dark masses and tonal contrasts, eliminates precision and crudity of detail, a certain distance being enforced by the medium itself. The brothel where Degas undertook these studies was a fairly ordinary neighbourhood business; luxurious – with big mirrors, chandeliers, thick carpet and buttoned upholstery – but lacking the opulent exoticism of more luxury establishments. His prostitutes are painted from the same model, virtually identical in features and style, systematically denuded or wearing only accessories, such as black stockings or transparent cami-knickers, that highlight their bodies.

Degas's observations tend to focus on the mundane drudgery experienced by prostitutes waiting between clients rather than on their sexual acts, although by their very nature these scenes have a certain illicit voyeurism. His sex workers are just that – workers – having the same status in Degas's art as his dancers, theatre performers, laundresses and jockeys. The brothel client is as furtive as the Opéra season-ticket holder he depicted earlier – an intruder out of place in this feminine universe, carefully sized up and incited but protected by his dark suit, hat and cane, incongruous amid the nudity.

The siesta – Scene from a brothel
La Sieste (Scène de maison close)
1878–80
monotype

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Katherine E. Bullard Fund in memory of Francis Bullard 61.1215

The Procureess

L'Entremetteuse

1876–77

monotype

Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), Bibliothèque, Paris
Jacques Doucet Collection

EM DEGAS 6

On the bed

Sur le lit

1876–77

monotype

Loaned by the Musée national Picasso-Paris

Donation Picasso 1978

In the 1870s and 1880s Degas sought to show the diversity of working-class female physicality in his pastels and monotypes. As has often been pointed out, his physical types conformed more to popular perceptions than to particular observed realities. Whereas peasant girls and factory workers were seen to have lean, work-hardened bodies, prostitutes were perceived as their physical opposite: pale and fleshy from their supposedly indolent indoor existence away from the sunlight. Images of the *maison close* exerted a particular fascination for a male clientele who fuelled the market for pornographic photographs in brothel settings at this time.

The name day of the Madam

La Fête de la patronne

1878–79

pastel on monotype

Loaned by the Musée national Picasso-Paris
Donation Picasso 1978

RF35791

The all-female world of the *maison close*, or brothel, was a subject of voyeuristic interest to Degas. In this scene the affectionate bond between the women suggests a sexual and emotional economy independent of men. At the same time, Degas shows the power relation between the clothed madam and her naked working girls as one of exploitation as well as protection and friendship.

For Kids

In the 1880s French laundresses started work at 5am and didn't finish until almost midnight. That's like fitting two school days into one day! Edgar's art studio was near a poor area of Paris where many laundresses lived and worked. It was important to Edgar to show the laundresses working hard and not just posing. He liked to paint them in action, washing the clothes by hand and using heavy irons heated with coal to flatten the wrinkles. There were no washing machines in the 1800s!

What jobs do you do to help at home or at school?

Waiting (second version)

L'Attente

1879

monotype on Chinese paper

Loaned by the Musée national Picasso-Paris
Donation Picasso 1978

RF35786

Working women: 1870s and 1880s

From the 1870s Degas became addicted to the exploration of motifs depicting repetitive labour or physical activity. His numerous depictions of laundresses seen through the windows of their premises reflect an awareness of the monotony brought about by the mechanisation of life and work created by industrial modernisation. They also display a respect for the hard physical labour represented, coupled with an unsettling voyeurism imparted by their often elevated viewpoint. With his studies of dancers, laundresses, *café-concert* singers and prostitutes, Degas was seen in this period as the champion of what has been called 'scientific realism'. His friend the art critic Edmond Duranty had argued in 1867 that artists should consider applying a 'physiognomic science' to their work: 'Determine whether people whose face has some analogy with that of animals whose customs and instincts are well known share some relationship with that animal in respect of their own tendencies'.

As with his portraits of *café-concert* singers, Degas's frank studies of working women frequently give them a rodent-like profile, seeming to indicate that he drew inspiration from Charles Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), first translated into French in 1874. Degas's dancers invariably have the 'plebeian snout' that he later celebrated in one of his sonnets: 'singers onstage stretch out mitts that move like those of Meissen grotesques [in the *Monkey Orchestra*]'. Duranty also encouraged artists to 'establish the physiognomic relationship between people exercising the same trade', a concept that Degas embraced when studying the relationships between women engaged in shared physical labour.

Woman resting and seated young girl
Femme se reposant et jeune fille assise

1884

black chalk and pastel on paper with strips added

Private collection, Paris

The laundress ironing

Blanchisseuse repassant

1882–86

oil on canvas

Reading Public Museum, Pennsylvania
Gift, Miss Martha Elizabeth Dick Estate

76.45.1

For Kids

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What jobs do you do to help at home or at school?

Head of a woman

Portrait de femme

1884
pastel

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Gift of Oveta Culp Hobby

84.406

In this portrait Degas eliminates all extraneous information, concentrating upon the sitter herself, who stares into the distance with the intriguing serenity of a Tanagra statuette. These Greek terracotta figurines produced at the end of the 4th century BCE were discovered by archaeologists during the 1870s. They appealed to the current taste for Realism in art and literature at this time, and many French artists inserted subtle references to them in their works of the 1870s and 1880s. The intense focus and broad handling of this pastel also recall the portraits of Paul Cézanne, which Degas greatly admired.

**Woman seated with a dog on her knee
(Mary Cassatt)**

***Femme assise tenant un chien sur les
genoux (Mary Cassatt)***

c. 1890

pastel

Private collection

The Conversation

La Conversation

1895

pastel

Courtesy of Acquavalla Galleries

Walter Sickert recalled Degas speaking of his obsession with observing women at their most private moments. He wanted to look at their private activities through keyholes, according to Sickert: 'He said that painters too much made of women formal portraits, whereas their hundred and one gestures, their *chatteries*, &c., should inspire an infinite variety of design'. *The Conversation* reflects the artist's love of Japanese woodblock prints and their frequently intimate subject matter. The specifics of setting are only alluded to in this exquisite pastel, the emphasis being placed instead upon the close relationship between these two elegant *Parisiennes*.

Dancer adjusting the strap of her bodice

Danseuse rajustant l'épaulette de son corsage

1885–1905

oil on canvas

Private collection, Chicago

Daniel Halévy, the son of Degas's old school friend Ludovic Halévy, recalled that Degas had 'a special way of translating his thoughts into gestures'. In many of his ballet studies, the gestures of the dancers in rehearsal assume as much significance as their actual performances, occupying a primary compositional focus. Degas was frequently preoccupied with the preparatory exercises and costume adjustments undertaken by dancers in the wings, as well as with their pre-performance tension. As with his observations of jockeys, Degas often preferred showing the moment of rest immediately prior to action, capturing the potential for physical exertion in a manner that fills his compositions with the latent power of a coiled spring.

Rose Caron

c. 1892

oil on canvas

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
Charles Clifton, Charles W. Goodyear
and Elisabeth H. Gates Funds, 1943

1943:1

Rose Caron made her operatic debut in Brussels in Giacomo Meyerbeer's famous opera *Robert le Diable* (*Robert the Devil*) in 1880. This mature example of Degas's portraiture – the soprano shown pulling elbow-length gloves over one elegant forearm – reflects his close observation of Caron's use of her arms for dramatic effect in her theatrical performances. He wrote enthusiastically to Ludovic Halévy in 1885: 'Mme Caron's arms are always there. How well she knows how to leave them for a long time in the air, without any affectation, a long time, those arms both thin and divine, and then to lower them gently'.

For Kids

Always looking for exciting action shots, Edgar was known for painting people in the middle of doing something. This is Rose Caron, a well-known singer for the Paris Opera who Edgar liked to watch perform. He even painted her on one of his fans. In this painting Rose is pulling on a long glove while holding a fan – perhaps she is getting ready for a performance.

Do you like to sing?

Women at their toilettes: 1880s and 1890s

From 1875 pastel became one of Degas's favourite techniques. Gustave Moreau had introduced him to this medium during their time together in Italy during the late 1850s, and the increasing interest in pastel in artistic circles during the 1870s influenced Degas's choice to explore its potential. At the eighth and last 'impressionist' group exhibition in 1886 Degas exhibited a suite of pastel studies of women bathing that challenged conventional notions of feminine beauty in their depiction of non-idealised *jolie-laide* (unconventionally beautiful) models. George Moore wrote tellingly of these nudes: 'The effect is prodigious. Degas has done what Baudelaire did – he has invented *un frisson nouveau* (a new sensation)'.

Because intimate access to female ablutions was rarely experienced by husbands in bourgeois married life at the time, it was assumed by critics and audiences that Degas's female nudes were performing their toilettes in a brothel setting. Their close observation of undressed women engaged in private acts of washing and drying themselves led Degas's ongoing status as a bachelor to become a topic of speculation in both the art world and wider social circles. Far from being a respectable state, in Degas's day bachelorhood was considered to be a social evil and a sign of degeneracy, a condition that challenged the status quo of both Second Empire and Third Republic family values. Degas's refusal to marry, as well as his apparent lack of sexual interest in women – despite his obsession with observing the naked female form – inevitably led to unfounded notions that he was a misogynist.

Woman at her toilette

Femme à sa toilette

c. 1895–1900

oil on canvas

Private collection

Woman drying herself

Femme s'essuyant

c. 1905

charcoal and pastel on tracing paper on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection,
gift of Sarah Campbell Blaffer

56.21

In the 1890s Luigi Chialiva, a mediocre painter of animals but a reliable technician of artistic products, such as fixatives and supposedly light-fast pastels, taught Degas an innovative new means of drawing employing tracing paper, which enabled him to reproduce the outline of a successful drawing as many times as he wished. Degas was noted for saying that 'the same subject must be done ten times, a hundred times over' until it was made perfect; this use of tracing paper allowed him to work on numerous variants of a single composition simultaneously.

Woman arranging her hair

Femme se coiffant

1894

oil on canvas

Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen

290 WH

Woman at her toilette

Femme à sa toilette

c. 1894

charcoal and pastel

Tate, London

Presented by C. Frank Stoop 1933

N04711

The repetitive work involved in a woman's daily maintenance of her hair appealed greatly to Degas. As early as 1878 he asked whether he could observe Geneviève Halévy, a cousin of his old school friend Ludovic, performing this private task. *Woman at her toilette* is a fascinating study of a woman's labour-intensive morning routine, drawn with a sense of pathos and human frailty. As well as reflecting the artist's love of Japanese woodblock prints with their frequently intimate subject matter, in this late drawing Degas applied his vivid pigments with an almost sculptural intensity, building them up as though modelling form with his fingers.

For Kids

In this drawing, Edgar sketched outlines in charcoal, and then added many layers of different coloured pastels. These colours help show the action of this woman's morning routine. Dressing for the day was an important ritual and many women had help getting ready. This lady is combing her hair as another woman, probably her helper, offers her a teacup. Wealthy women would sometimes take many hours preparing their hair, perfume and outfits each morning.

Can you get yourself dressed and ready for the day?

Woman in a tub

Femme au tub

1884–86

pastel

Tate, London

Bequeathed by Mrs A.F. Kessler 1983 03563

T03563

The critic Joris-Karl Huysmans delighted in the non-idealised female nudes displayed by Degas at the 'impressionist' group exhibition in 1886, aligning them with his own misogyny: 'Monsieur Degas, who seems to have been aggravated and irritated by the baseness of his world, must have wanted to take his revenge, and hurl in the face of his century the most extreme outrage – by toppling the idol so constantly kept and cared for, woman, whom he debases as he depicts her, in her tub, in the humiliating poses of her intimate activities'.

Bather sponging her knee

c. 1883–84

charcoal, pastel and grey wash

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Rogers Fund, 1918

19.51.3

Nude woman standing, drying herself

Femme nue debout à sa toilette

1891–92

lithograph, fourth of six states

Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts
Acquired by the Clark, 1962

1962.38

Nude woman standing, drying herself
Femme nue debout à sa toilette

1891–92

lithograph, sixth of six states

Private collection, Sydney

After the bath III

La Sortie de bain III

1891–92

lithograph, transfer and crayon, first of two states

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCA-80954

Dancer – Six sketches

Danseuse – Six croquis

c. 1878

charcoal on paper

Kate Ganz, New York

Degas was the first artist to specialise in depictions of the ballet, and ballet subjects comprised a third of all the works dispersed after his death in his studio sales. *Dancer – Six sketches* is a tour de force of rapid observation, with Degas capturing split-second moments of motion within a ballerina's performance in a manner then not widely possible via photography. He would combine these observed fragments into a majestic oil, *Dancer on pointe* (private collection) and a related gouache *The Star: Dancer on pointe* (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena). These sketches reveal a Degas more interested in musculature and movement than the dancer's identity or personality.

Finishing the arabesque

Fin d'arabesque

1877

oil, essence and pastel on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 4040

The Opéra's *petits rats* were mostly very poorly paid, with salary increases coming only after rigorous biannual examinations permitted advancement up the ranks. Very few dancers attained the supreme status and associated wealth of the *étoile* or star performer. It was widely recognised in Degas's day that many of the Opéra's aspiring dancers needed to supplement their income by performing sexual favours in the evenings for the *abonnés* – the male season-ticket holders who paid a premium for backstage and dressing-room access whereby their after-hours liaisons could be arranged, frequently with the complicity of the dancers' stage-mothers.

Sculptures

Although Degas exhibited only one sculpture during his lifetime, *The little fourteen-year-old dancer*, he worked in this medium in privacy in his studio from the 1860s until the 1910s. His primary subjects were thoroughbred racehorses, female dancers and women at their *toilette*, and he modelled his sculptures in wax, over steel wire and cork armatures. Never satisfied, he made, destroyed and remade them repeatedly. As Degas's eyesight deteriorated in his later years, making three-dimensional figures fulfilled a physical and emotional need that transcended any desire to perfect a finished object; he allegedly said that sculpture was 'a blind man's trade'.

After Degas's death in 1917, some 150 wax sculptures were found in his studio, some broken but many intact. His heirs subsequently authorised the casting in bronze, by the Adrien-A. Hébrard Foundry, Paris, and their Milanese master craftsman Albino Palazzolo, of seventy-four of the most intact of Degas's sculptures. Palazzolo first made a flexible gelatin mould of each of the wax sculptures, intricately detailed to the point of capturing the artist's fingerprints on the wax originals. From this he made a duplicate wax model of each sculpture, saving unharmed Degas's original wax models; he next used the duplicate to make, by the *cire perdue* or 'lost wax' method of casting, the bronzes you see here. While many of Degas's original wax sculptures still survive, they are too fragile to travel. These bronzes allow wider audiences today to engage with some of the most beautiful sculptures of the nineteenth century.

Picking apples

Cueillette des pommes

c. 1890, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

425 E

Head resting on one hand

Portrait, tête appuyée sur la main

c. 1885–88, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand

Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

424 E

Dancer rubbing her knee

Danseuse se frottant le genou

c. 1884–85, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

380 E

The Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard recalled how, on a visit to Degas's studio, 'One day he showed me a little dancer that he had done over for the twentieth time. "I believe I've got it at last", he announced ... The next day, however, all that remained of the little dancing girl was the original lump of wax from which she had sprung. Seeing my disappointment, Degas said: "All you think of, Vollard, is what it was worth. But I wouldn't take a bucket of gold for the pleasure I had in destroying it and beginning over again"'.

The masseuse

La Masseuse

c. 1896–1911, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

421 E

Seated woman wiping the nape of her neck

Femme assise s'essuyant la nuque

c. 1901, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

411 E

The experimental nature of Degas's sculptural practice is reflected in the varying degrees of finish in many of the sculptures he made. Some, such as this work, appear to be far from fully realised, exhibiting large and raw surface bumps in certain areas with others more polished and refined. This reflects the sporadic manner in which Degas worked on his sculptures, frequently setting them aside and then returning to them as inspiration gripped him or a new idea materialised about how to resolve a compositional issue or problem of musculature.

The tub

Le Tub

1888–89, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

409 E

Seated woman wiping her left side
Femme assise s'essuyant la hanche
gauche

c. 1901–11, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

420 E

**Dancer looking at the sole of her right
foot**

***Danseuse regardant la plante de son
pied droit***

c. 1890–1900, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

388 E

**Dancer at rest, hands behind her back,
right leg forward**

***Danseuse au repos, les mains sur les
hanches, jambe droite en avant***

c. 1890, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

377 E

**Woman seated in an armchair wiping
her left armpit**

***Femme assise dans un fauteuil
s'essuyant l'aisselle gauche***

c. 1901–11, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

413 E

**Dancer adjusting the shoulder strap of
her bodice**

***Danseuse attachant l'épaulette de son
corsage***

1882–95, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

381 E

Woman washing her left leg

Femme se lavant la jambe gauche

c. 1890, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

417 E

Dancer with bouquets

Danseuse aux bouquets

c. 1895–1900

oil on canvas

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia
Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr,
in memory of Della Viola Forker Chrysler

71.507

For Kids

Can you find all the flowers in this painting? You'll find some in the dancer's hair, some lying at the dancer's feet, and even some in the stage set's backdrop. These flowers are secret clues to the stories happening outside the picture frame. For example, the bouquet at the dancer's feet reveals that the audience is applauding her. The blooms on the backdrop show that this ballet was set in the countryside. These stage sets helped the audience imagine the story, just like the images in a picture book or a movie.

Do you have a favourite picture book?

Final years – landscapes

In 1889 Degas travelled through Spain with an Italian painter friend Giovanni Boldini, and the following year he journeyed by tilbury coach through the French countryside with the sculptor Albert Bartholomé. While travelling with Bartholomé, Degas stayed at Diénay, Burgundy, with a friend who had an etching press. This inspired him to make his first colour monotypes, recording on the plate the landscapes glimpsed from the tilbury, which Bartholomé had steered. Created thus from memory, these landscapes offered what has been aptly described as ‘optical enrichment’, due to Degas’s frequent layering of vivid pastel hues over coloured monotype underlays. In September 1892, Degas astonished his good friend Ludovic Halévy and his family by announcing that the ‘fruits of my journeys this summer’ had been ‘twenty-one landscapes’. As he put it: ‘I stood at the doors of the coaches and I looked around vaguely. That gave me the idea to do the landscapes’. These monotypes were, he added, ‘imaginary landscapes’.

In the autumn of 1892, and again in October 1894, he exhibited twenty or so of these monotype and pastel landscapes at Paul Durand-Ruel’s gallery in Paris. The critic Gustave Geffroy compared them at the time to ‘precious sapphires in velvet jewellery boxes’. In 1898 Degas made a final foray into landscape, working in Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme, where his brother René’s family spent their summers. These last landscapes possess Gauguin-like qualities, confirming for him that there was no need to travel to exotic locales such as Polynesia when the French provinces provided such picturesque resources.

Landscape

Paysage

c. 1892

pastel

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund

91.231

Landscape

Paysage

1890–93

pastel over monotype

Private collection, Paris

Landscape: Estérel village

Paysage: Village dans l'Estérel

1890–93

monotype in oil on cream paper

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

RCC-10296

Undulating hills

Terrains vallonnés

c. 1890–93

pastel over monotype

Collection of Mme Catherine Trèves

The return of the herd

La Rentrée du troupeau

1898
oil on canvas

Leicester Arts and Museums Service, Leicester

11A1969

In 1931 Jeanne Raunay noted that at Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme, in the Somme region of France where Degas made his last landscapes, he 'found everything he loved: the sea and its surprises, streets lined with old houses, the walls of a ruined keep and a monumental gate through which Joan of Arc had passed'. Degas painted or drew in pastel some dozen compositions, all muted tones and orange, mauve and yellow harmonies. He painted a number of views of the town apparently deserted by its population, through which a ghostly herd of cows can sometimes be seen wandering.

For Kids

This scene would look quiet and still without the big cows wandering down the middle of the road. Can you see how the cow's heads are blurry, as if they have been caught in action? It looks as if they could walk right out of the painting into the art gallery! Edgar liked to experiment with different paints to help show movement in his pictures. For these sluggish cows he has chosen thick oil on canvas.

Can you imagine all these cows walking through the Gallery?

The billiard room at Ménil Hubert

Salle de billard au Ménil-Hubert

1892

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 1989 3

During his many holidays with friends, Degas acknowledged the social disadvantage of his inability to play billiards, but the billiards room interested him aesthetically. Degas spent the summer of 1892 with his friends the Valpinçons at their country estate at Ménil-Hubert, Normandy, from where he wrote to the sculptor Bartholomé: 'I wanted to paint and I set about doing billiard interiors. I thought I knew a little about perspective, I know nothing at all, I thought that one could replace it by a process of perpendiculars and horizontals, measure angles in space by means of good will alone.'

INSERT FINAL YEARS WOMEN AT THEIR TOILETTES DIDACTIC HERE

After the bath

Après le bain. Femme s'essuyant

c. 1900

charcoal on tracing paper on cardboard

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Margaret Hannah Olley Art Trust 1994

222.1994

**Woman seated on the edge of a bath
sponging her neck**

***Femme assise sur le bord d'une
baignoire et s'épongeant le cou***

1880–95

oil and essence on paper on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 1989 2

Woman at her bath

Femme au bain

c. 1895

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Purchase, Frank P. Wood Endowment, 1956

55/49

Nude woman drying herself

Femme au Tub

c. 1884–86

oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, New York
Carll H de Silva Fund

31.813

Toilette after the bath

La Toilette après le bain

c. 1890

charcoal and white pastel on tracing paper

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Gift of Sam and Ayala Zacks, 1970

71/112

Dancer in a leotard
Danseuse en maillot

c. 1896

pastel on paper on cardboard

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF MO AG 2014 2

Nude woman lying down

Femme nue couchee

c. 1901

charcoal

Private collection

The bather
La Baigneuse
c. 1895
pastel and charcoal

Reading Public Museum, Pennsylvania
Bequest, Henry K. Dick Estate

1954.36.1

After bathing, two nude women

La Sortie du bain, deux femmes nues

1890–95
pastel

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen

2787

In the closing years of the nineteenth century Degas relocated a group of female nudes from their bathroom settings, re-situating them in his preferred poses within a landscape and quasi-narrative setting, almost as though he was looking back towards the historicising compositions of his youthful years. There are affinities here with the scenes of bathers created by Paul Cézanne, a painter whom Degas admired and collected.

Woman bending over, viewed from behind

Femme nue baissée de dos

1900

charcoal and pastel on paper on cardboard

Private collection, New South Wales

Woman drying herself

Femme s'essuyant

1890–95

charcoal on buff paper on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest 1947

1801-4

Walter Sickert, a close friend of Degas, recalled: 'We went out in a party one day with the vague intention of sketching, into a field ... and it was here that Degas said to me a thing of sufficient importance never to be forgotten. "I always tried", he said, "to urge my colleagues to seek for new combinations along the path of draughtsmanship, which I consider a more fruitful field than that of colour. But they wouldn't listen to me, and have gone the other way"'.

After the bath

Après le bain

1896–1907

charcoal

Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris
Bequest of Lucien Henraux, 1926

25452

Later years – racecourses

Constructed as part of the redevelopment of Paris under Emperor Napoléon III, Longchamp Racecourse opened to great fanfare in 1857. Nestled in the huge expanse of the Bois du Boulogne, it sits between bends in the River Seine to the west of the city. Around twenty years later the Auteuil Hippodrome, designed for steeplechase, also opened in the same parkland area and was accessible via one of Paris's grand boulevards. It was said that in the 1890s the roar of the racing crowds could be heard beneath the Eiffel Tower. Under imperial patronage, the popularity of racing with the upper and middle classes was immense and, much like the Melbourne Spring Racing Carnival, people flocked to the races to see and be seen.

Artists were naturally drawn to this colourful spectacle, and from the 1860s Degas as well as Édouard Manet (and later Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) created iconic images of the races and racegoers. Always experimental, Degas departed from the usual approach typical of sporting artists and his friendly rival, Manet. Traditionally, racing was portrayed from the viewpoint of the spectator, with artists making stylised scenes of massed galloping horses seen from across the fence; Degas, however, immersed the viewer at the heart of the action. He rarely showed the race itself, preferring the tension inherent in the rituals and waiting for the starter's flag to fall.

Horse balking

Cheval se dressant

1880s, cast 1919–32
bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves, Alberto Alves Filho
and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

396 E

Rearing horse

Cheval se cabrant

1880s, cast 1919–32

bronze

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Alberto José Alves,
Alberto Alves Filho and Alcino Ribeiro de Lima

397 E

Degas spent time at racecourses observing horses and horsemen before he began sculpting in his studio, giving his countless drawings of horses and the images frozen in his mind the vital third dimension. From one image to the next, Degas set out his models – the horse head-on, in profile, from behind, rearing up, trotting, at the gallop – like a director plotting the location of his actors on the stage.

Before the race

Avant la course

c. 1882

oil on wood panel

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts
Acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1939

1955.557

Degas may not have been a horseman himself but his admiration for the animal shines through each of the hundreds of studies he made of them throughout his life. It seems as if he worked over many decades to capture something that continually eluded him. Perhaps he found this essence in his late oils and pastels of horses, which are radiant with colour, a joyous celebration of the individuality and personality of each animal. A true lover of horses, Degas penned sonnets about them, and in 1890 he wrote to Ludovic Halévy: 'For the traveller the beat of horses' hoofs is sweeter than a woman's footstep'.

For Kids

Edgar went to horseraces and then made works of art that showed the action and excitement that he saw there. In nineteenth-century France, successful jockeys and horses were celebrities. In this painting, each horse is looking in a different direction. The horses and their jockeys are nervously waiting for the race to begin.

Which horse do you think will win?

Before the race

Avant le depart

c. 1883–90

pastel

Private collection

It took years for Degas to be satisfied with his depiction of racehorses. In the late 1860s and early 1870s the images remained diverse: the scene may have been set in a specific racecourse, such as Longchamp, or on the plain of Argentan. Professional jockeys or, more often, amateur 'gentlemen' may be represented; and spectators can appear in the foreground or at some distance from the action. The works of the 1880s, however, are subsumed in colour and movement, and they consistently show jockeys in strongly coloured silks and caps riding their horses through indecisive or fictive landscapes.

Racehorses

Chevaux de courses

c. 1895–99

pastel on tracing paper on cardboard

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Purchased 1950

5771

Final years – photography

Photography was a new medium to which Degas devoted himself from the mid 1890s onwards. He was enamoured in particular by the possibilities photography provided for capturing indoor illumination at night and Degas took particular care to position lamps and reflectors in the search for an almost spiritual quality. The medium's often ghostly imperfections encourage unexpectedly Symbolist readings at times. Surviving accounts of his photographic sessions indicate that he approached his photographs with the same authorial precision that he brought to all his art forms, even to the point of physically manipulating his sitters' heads and limbs; however, his desire for perfection was always competing with his innate passion for experimentation.

Photography played an important part in the later years of Degas's close friendship with the Halévy family. Ludovic Halévy had been a friend since their school days together at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in the 1840s. His son Daniel's journal provides vivid accounts of the artist stage-managing photographic sessions after dinner at the Halévys in 1895, seeking effects that were 'difficult – the atmosphere of lamps or moonlight'. Leaves from the Halévy family photo album are displayed here, containing small photographic prints that record these intimate evenings. Degas frequently marked-up such small prints, indicating how he would like them cropped or developed in a lighter or darker manner. A local photographic materials salesman in the 9th arrondissement, Guillaume Tasset, was then tasked with making these enlargements and changes, creating the large-format 'exhibition' photographs that are also displayed here.

Daniel Halévy

14 October 1895

gelatin silver print

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of the children of Mme Halévy-Joxe

PHO 1994-1 2

Daniel Halévy described how after dinner at his parents' house one evening in December 1895, Degas brought out his camera and 'the pleasure-part of the evening was at an end; Degas raised his voice, became authoritarian, ordered that a light should be taken into the small salon and that anyone who was not going to pose should decamp there. The duty-part of the evening began. One had to obey Degas's redoubtable will, his artistic ferocity. Right now, all his friends speak of him in terror. If you invite him for the evening, you know what you're letting yourself in for: two hours of military obedience'.

Louise Halévy

14 October 1895

gelatin silver print

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of the children of Mme Halévy-Joxe

PHO 1994-1 1

Louise and Daniel Halévy

Louise Halévy reclining

Louise Halévy allongée

Louise Halévy reading to Degas

Louise Halévy faisant la lecture à

Degas

Autumn 1895

gelatin silver prints

Private collection, Paris

**Jules Taschereau, Degas and
Jacques Émile Blanche**

William Busnach

Jacques-Émile and Rose Blanche

Jacques-Émile and Rose Blanche

mid December 1895

gelatin silver prints

Private collection, Paris

Daniel Halévy

Louise Halévy

14 October 1895

gelatin silver prints

Private collection, Paris

**Henriette Taschereau, Mathilde
Niaudet, and Jules Taschereau; Sophie
Taschereau-Niaudet and Jeanne
Niaudet**

**Mathilde and Jeanne Niaudet, Daniel
Halévy, and Henriette Taschereau;
Ludovic and Élie Halévy**

**Mathilde and Jeanne Niaudet, Daniel
Halévy, and Henriette Taschereau;
Ludovic and Élie Halévy**

28 December 1895
gelatin silver prints

Private collection, Paris

French

Palm driveway. Mahmoud II, gardener

Allée de palmiers. Mahmoud II jardinier

1896

gelatin silver print

Edgar Degas

French 1834-1917

Jules Taschereau

1895

gelatin silver print

Private collection, Paris

Paule Gobillard, Jeannie Gobillard, Julie Manet, and Geneviève Mallarmé

16 December 1895

gelatin silver print

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Gift of Paul F. Walter, 2000

2000.655.1

Geneviève and Marie Mallarmé

16 December 1895

gelatin silver print

Musée départemental Stéphane Mallarmé

Vulaines-sur-Seine

985-128-1

Auguste Renoir and Stéphane Mallarmé

16 December 1895

gelatin silver print

Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris

Inv. 79

This photograph was taken on the same evening as the photographic portrait of Geneviève and Marie Mallarmé, displayed adjacent. Both works document a unique artistic and literary partnership. *Auguste Renoir and Stéphane Mallarmé* offers a telling triple portrait centred on Degas's obsession with sight lines and the power of the gaze, his poet friend Mallarmé's affectionate view of the Impressionist painter Renoir being echoed by Renoir's warm outlook towards Degas, who is in turn reflected spectrally in the mirror observing both of his old friends.

Self-portrait with Zoé Closier

probably autumn 1895

gelatin silver print

Bibliothèque nationale de France

Est. Eo 53b

Zoé Closier was Degas's housekeeper in his later years. Also single, she acted as his cook, cleaner, errand-runner, nurse when required, and fierce guardian of his privacy. While her cooking skills apparently left much to be desired, she was an invaluable companion, keeping Degas informed of contemporary events by reading the newspapers to him as his eyesight failed. Degas scholar Roy McMullen described her as 'a round woman in her forties, with a round face, round eyes, large round glasses, and the serious, authoritative air of a schoolmistress, which reportedly she once had been'.

For Kids

As Edgar got older and his eyesight worsened, he started experimenting more with pastels, wax sculptures and photography. Edgar took this 'selfie' with his housekeeper Zoé, who is standing behind Edgar looking straight at the camera. In the late 1800s it was easier to make a photographic portrait than to ask someone to sit for a painted portrait. Edgar was very proud of his photographs but he didn't exhibit them alongside his famous paintings.

Do you like to take photographs?

Self-portrait with Bartholomé's Weeping girl

Autoportrait à la statue de Bartholomé

probably autumn 1895

gelatin silver print

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of the Société des Amis du Musée d'Orsay

PHO 1992 5

Final years – portraits

In the late 1890s and early 1900s Degas increasingly complained to friends about his deteriorating eyesight. This, along with the deaths of numerous old friends and family members, brought distress to his later years, as did the outbreak of the Dreyfus Affair. A political scandal involving a Jewish army officer falsely accused of espionage by corrupt military officials, the Dreyfus Affair polarised French society in the late 1890s, dividing families and ruining friendships over issues of anti-Semitism and support for or opposition to military, religious and political reform. An ex-soldier and pro-military, Degas sided with the *anti-dreyfusard* camp, ultimately severing his lifelong friendship with his school friend Ludovic Halévy.

Other friendships now became vital for the ageing artist. He enjoyed his closeness to Alexis and Louis, the sons of Henri Rouart, another fellow pupil from Degas's youthful days at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and their wives and families, telling Alexis Rouart in December 1904, 'It is true, my dear friend, you put it well, you are all my family'. The frustration of Degas's struggle with his eyesight problems can be detected in his nonetheless expressive drawings of the younger Rouarts. That Degas would attempt to undertake portraiture at a time when his sight was so compromised reflects his comfortable relationship with the Rouarts. As he also wrote to Alexis at this time: 'I am impatient for the family Rouart to be back in Paris, because I am alone and abandoned'.

Madame Alexis Rouart

Mme Alexis Rouart

c. 1905

charcoal and chalk

Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri
Friends Fund, Museum Purchase,
and Gift of Mr and Mrs James E. Rarick, by exchange

35:1979

Study for a portrait of Monsieur and Madame Louis Rouart

Esquisse pour un portrait (M. et Mme Louis Rouart)

1904

pastel and charcoal with stumping and traces of erasing on
tracing paper on cardboard

Richard and Mary L. Gray and the Gray Collection Trust, Chicago

0780005

The Russian dancer

Danseuse russe

1895

pastel and charcoal on joined paper on board

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Gift of the Sara Lee Corporation

2000.115

After visiting Degas's studio on 1 July 1899, Julie Manet wrote in her diary: 'He talked about painting, then suddenly said to us: "I'm going to show you the orgies of colour that I'm doing at the moment" ... He pulled out three pastels representing women in Russian costume with flowers in their hair, pearl collars, white blouses, brightly coloured skirts and red boots, dancing in an imaginary landscape that is extraordinarily real'. The visit of Tsar Nicholas II to Paris in 1896 may have led to Degas's interest in depicting dancers performing what appears to be a *gopak* Cossack dance.

Woman wiping her left leg

Femme s'essuyant la jambe gauche

1903

charcoal and pastel

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand
Donated by Henryk Sptzman Jordan

84 P

In 1894 the critic Gustave Geffroy noted Degas's preference for studying musculature rather than psychology in his late nudes: 'Degas had another comprehension of life, a different concern for exactitude before nature. There is certainly a woman there [in Degas's pictures], but a certain kind of woman, without the expression of a face, without the wink of an eye ... a woman reduced to the gesticulation of her limbs, to the appearance of her body, a woman considered as a female, expressed in her animality, as if it were a matter of a superior illustration in a zoological textbook'. This drawing is the last work that Degas inscribed with a date.

Final years – dancers

Degas's paintings and pastels of the 1890s and 1900s display an ever-increasing intensity of colour, what he in fact called 'orgies of colour'. In his late works, Degas unhesitatingly applied apple green, fluorescent pink or canary yellow to his studies of dancers, with their progressively sketchier faces and in their polychrome tutus, who endlessly rehearse a limited repertory of movements: adjusting an epaulette, scratching their backs or fluffing up their underskirts. Sometimes the black and white of a large sheet drawn in charcoal is highlighted with a single note of brilliant colour; sometimes a lively dominant colour stands out on the rich texture of a pastel, its successive layers placed and meticulously fixed one after another, striped and hatched strokes overlapping and juxtaposed. The support is generally tracing paper – or several pieces of tracing paper placed end to end – mounted by a professional onto a more rigid surface.

Degas very rarely exhibited in these later years, keeping the majority of his work private. After 1890 only around 150 works – a little more than a quarter of his output – were bought and sold during his lifetime; the rest were to remain buried in his studio until his death, alongside a substantial portion of earlier works. These final, iridescent dancers remind us that Degas spent a life working and researching his art with a single-minded desire to bring form to what was formless in the world and express his constantly evolving vision of that world.

Three dancers
Les Trois danseuses
1896–1905
pastel

Lent by Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf
of Glasgow City Council: from the Burrell Collection
with the approval of the Burrell Trustees

35.249

Dancers at the barre

Danseuses à la barre

1900

charcoal and pastel on tracing paper on cardboard

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Purchased 1921

1826

For Kids

Edgar produced more than 1000 artworks of dancers. Just like the ballerinas who practised their dance steps over and over, Edgar practised his drawing and painting skills again and again. He would sketch the dancers in rehearsal as they worked on their postures and gestures. Sometimes Edgar would pay the dancers to come to his studio and pose while he sketched them or made wax sculptures. Edgar and the ballerinas he drew would have agreed that practice makes perfect!

What do you like to practise?

Three dancers

1895–1905

charcoal on tracing paper with traces of blue paint

Collection of Jean Bonna, Geneva

Three nude dancers
Trois danseuses nues
c. 1903
charcoal

Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection, Little Rock
Purchase, Fred W. Allsopp Memorial Acquisition Fund

1982.010.002

Before the performance

Scène de ballet

c. 1896–98

oil on paper on canvas

Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh
Presented by Sir Alexander Maitland
in memory of his wife Rosalind, 1960

NG 2224

Dancers at a rehearsal

Danseuses au foyer

1895–98

oil on canvas

Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal

Gift of Dr Eduard Freiherr von der Heydt, Ascona, 1961

G 1046

Group of dancers (red skirts)

Groupe de danseuses (Jupes rouges)

1895–1900

pastel

Lent by Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf of
Glasgow City Council: from the Burrell Collection with
the approval of the Burrell Trustees

35.243

Throughout his career Degas produced more than 700 works in pastel. In the 1870s he often worked 'wet', employing *pastel à l'eau* (crushing pastel sticks to powder which, mixed with water, could be applied with a brush) to create smooth, seamless textures. By the mid 1890s he worked increasingly with layers of pastel cemented together over applications of fixative. This created shimmering optical effects that celebrated the crumbly texture of the pastel medium.

Dancer looking at the sole of her right foot (Second study)

Danseuse regardant la plante de son pied droit. Deuxième étude

c. 1900–10, cast 1919–37 or later

bronze

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by Leigh Clifford AO and Sue Clifford, 2016

Sometime between 1900 and 1910–12, in spite of his failing eyesight, Degas modelled four sculptures in wax depicting a dancer looking at the sole of her right foot. This sculpture is the second study from the series. All four works from this time show the dancer delicately poised on her left leg, but in slightly different poses. When seen together, she appears animated across the four sculptures as she progressively raises her leg to get a closer look at her foot. While Degas employed models to pose in his studio in these years, he doubtless also worked from memory, recalling images from many hours spent watching ballerinas in rehearsal.