

Degas and His Dancers

What the painter saw in the ballet was,
paradoxically, 'the depoetization of life.'

by Paul Trachtman, © 2004

Originally appeared in Smithsonian, April 2003

“Yesterday I spent the whole day in the studio of a strange painter called Degas,” Parisian man of letters Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his diary in 1874. “Out of all the subjects in modern life he has chosen washerwomen and ballet dancers...it is a world of pink and white...the most delightful of pretexts for using pale, soft tints.” Edgar Degas, 39 years old at the time, would paint ballerinas for the rest of his career, and de Goncourt was right about the pretext. “People call me the painter of dancing girls,” Degas later told Paris art dealer Ambroise Vollard. “It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement and painting pretty clothes.”

Degas loved to deflate the image people had of him, but his words ring true, expressing his love for the grace of drawing and the charm of color. As a student Degas dreamed of drawing like Raphael and Michelangelo, and he later revived the French tradition of pastels that had flourished with the 18th-century master Chardin. But like his contemporaries, Manet, Cézanne and the Impressionists, he lived in an age of photography and electricity, and he turned to aspects of modern life—to slums, brothels and horse races—to apply his draftsmanship. Bathing nudes became a favorite subject, but he once compared his more contemporary studies to those of Rembrandt with mocking wit. “He had the luck, that Rembrandt!” Degas said. “He painted Susanna at the bath; me, I paint women at the tub.”

At the ballet Degas found a world that excited both his taste for classical beauty and his eye for modern realism. He haunted the wings and classrooms of the magnificent Palais Garnier, home of the Paris Opéra and its Ballet, where some of the city’s poorest young girls struggled to become the fairies, nymphs and queens of the stage. As he became part of this world of pink and white, so full of tradition, he invented new techniques for drawing and painting it. He claimed the ballet for modern art just as Cézanne was claiming the landscape. The writer Daniel Halévy, who as a youth often talked with Degas, later noted that it was at the Opéra that Degas hoped to find subjects of composition as valid as Delacroix had found in history.

Now Degas’s pencil and chalk drawings, monotype prints and pastels, oil paintings and sculptures of ballerinas have been gathered from museums and private collections around the world for an exhibition entitled “Degas and the Dance.” The show was organized by the American Federation of Arts along with the Detroit Institute of the Arts, where it was first shown last year, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it is on display through May 11. In the accompanying catalog, guest curators and art historians Richard Kendall, a Degas authority, and Jill DeVonyar, a former ballet dancer, trace Degas’s life backstage based on their research in the records of the Paris Opéra Ballet. And this month at the Palais Garnier, the Ballet will premiere a dazzling new work, *La Petite Danseuse de Degas*, about the ballerina who posed for Degas’s most celebrated sculpture, the *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*. Sparked by research in the late 1990s by the ballet company’s cultural director, Martine Kahane, and choreographed by

Opéra ballet master Patrice Bart, the new work—part fact, part fantasy—is designed to evoke the world of ballet that entranced Degas and to capture the atmosphere of his paintings.

The ballerinas Degas bequeathed to us remain among the most popular images in 19th-century art. The current exhibition is a reminder of just how daring the artist was in creating them. He cropped his pictures as a photographer would (and also became one); he defied traditional composition, opting for asymmetry and radical viewpoints; and he rubbed pastels over his monotype (or one-of-a-kind) prints, creating dramatic effects. Yet he always managed to keep an eye on the great masters of the past. His younger friend, the poet Paul Valéry, described him as “divided against himself; on the one hand driven by an acute preoccupation with truth, eager for all the newly introduced and more or less felicitous ways of seeing things and of painting them; on the other hand possessed by a rigorous spirit of classicism, to whose principles of elegance, simplicity and style he devoted a lifetime of analysis.”

Degas became a painter in an extraordinary period and place. He was born in Paris in 1834, two years after Manet and during a decade that saw the birth of the painters Cézanne, Monet, Renoir and Berthe Morisot and the poets Mallarmé and Verlaine. His father was a banker and art lover who supported his son’s studies, sending him in 1855 to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. The family had branches in Italy and in the United States (his mother was Creole, born in New Orleans), and young Degas went to Italy to study the masters, spending several years in Naples, Florence and Rome, where he copied Vatican treasures and Roman antiquities, before returning to Paris in 1859. There he at first labored with huge canvases—historical subjects and portraits like those Ingres and Delacroix had painted a generation before—for the Royal Academy’s official Salon exhibitions. Then in 1862, while copying a Velázquez at the Louvre, Degas met the artist Edouard Manet, who drew him into the circle of Impressionist painters. It was in part due to Manet’s influence that Degas turned to subjects from contemporary life, including café scenes, the theater and dance.

Degas’s affluence was not unique among the painters of his day. His young friend Daniel Halévy called him “one of the children of the Second Empire,” a period that had produced an enormously rich bourgeoisie. These artists, Halévy said, included “the Manets, the Degas, the Cézannes, the Puvis de Chavannes. They pursued their work without asking anything of anyone.” As Halévy saw it, financial independence was the root of modern art in his day. “Their state of liberty is rare in the history of the arts, perhaps unique,” he reflected. “Never were artists freer in their researches.”

Degas found a studio and an apartment in the bohemian district of Montmartre, where he lived and worked most of his life. It was a quarter of artists’ studios and cabarets, the well-off and the poor, washerwomen and prostitutes. As Kendall and DeVonyar point out, his neighbors over the years included Renoir, Gustave Moreau (later Matisse’s teacher), Toulouse-Lautrec, Mary Cassatt and van Gogh, as well as musicians, dancers and other artists who worked at the Paris Opéra and its ballet. One of Degas’s close friends was the writer Ludovic Halévy (Daniel’s father), who collaborated with popular composers such as Delibes, Offenbach and Bizet. The artist could walk from his apartment to the gallery of art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, where he showed one of his first ballet pictures in 1871, and to the old rue Le Peletier opera house, which was destroyed by fire in 1873.

Opera and ballet were a fashionable part of Parisian cultural life, and Degas was likely in the audience long before he began to paint the dancers. Indeed, some of his first dance paintings portray the audience and orchestra as prominently as the ballerinas onstage. Degas also wanted to get behind the scenes, but that wasn’t easy. It was a privilege paid for by wealthy male subscription holders, called abonnés, who often lurked

in the foyers, flirted with the dancers in the wings and laid siege to their dressing rooms. Degas at first had to invoke the help of influential friends to slip him into the ballerinas' private world (he would later become an abonné himself). In a circa 1882 letter to Albert Hecht, a prominent collector and friend, he wrote, "My dear Hecht, Have you the power to get the Opéra to give me a pass for the day of the dance examination, which, so I have been told, is to be on Thursday? I have done so many of these dance examinations without having seen them that I am a little ashamed of it."

For a time, Degas turned his attention to the abonnés, stalking them as they stalked the dancers. In the 1870s the elder Halévy had written a series of stories, *The Cardinal Family*, satirizing the often sordid affairs of young dancers, their mothers and the abonnés. Degas produced a suite of monotype prints for the stories, portraying the abonnés as dark, top-hatted figures. (Similar figures would appear in some of his other compositions as well.) Although Halévy didn't use them when the collection was published, they are among Degas's most haunting dance images, with a realism reminiscent of the caricatures of his contemporary, Daumier.

Though Degas exhibited his work with the Impressionists, his realism always set him apart. The Impressionists, complained the poet Valéry, "reduced the whole intellectual side of art to a few questions about texture and the coloring of shadows. The brain became nothing but retina." Degas's contemporaries saw something more in his work. Daniel Halévy described it as a "depoetization" of life, a fascination with the simplest, most intimate, least beautiful gestures—ballerinas stretching at the bar, practicing positions, waiting in the wings, taking instruction, scratching themselves, tying their shoes, adjusting their tutus, rubbing sore muscles, fixing their hair, fanning, talking, flirting, daydreaming, and doing almost everything but dancing. Degas's pictures of ballerinas performing onstage convey exquisitely what makes ballet ballet—all that balance, grace and radiance that a contemporary critic called "mimed poetry, dream made visible." But, paradoxically, Degas preferred to portray ballet by stripping away the poetry and illusion to show the hard work, the boredom, the more common beauty behind the scenes. In a sonnet written about 1889, Degas addressed the young ballerinas: "One knows that in your world / Queens are made of distance and greasepaint."

Some complained that the greasepaint showed. Degas's idol Ingres, who had advised him as a neophyte painter to draw constantly from memory and nature, and who had painted dancing nymphs into his own romantic tableaux, longed for the more courtly ballet of earlier days. "We see wretches disfigured by their efforts, red, inflamed with fatigue, and so indecently strapped-up that they would be more modest if they were naked," he wrote.

In 1875, a new Paris opera house opened—the Palais Garnier, named after its architect, Charles Garnier. It was a towering edifice of marble ornament and gilded decor, all but encrusted with antique statuary and classic murals. Garnier designed a mirrored foyer for backstage, he wrote, "as a setting for the charming swarms of ballerinas, in their picturesque and coquettish costumes." To the young student dancers, affectionately called "petit rats," Degas with his sketch pad became a familiar sight. A backstage friend noted, "He comes here in the morning. He watches all the exercises in which the movements are analyzed, and...nothing in the most complicated step escapes his gaze." One ballerina later recalled that he "used to stand at the top or bottom of the many staircases...drawing the dancers as they rushed up and down." Sometimes he made notes on his drawings, criticizing a dancer's balance, or the placement of a leg. On one sketch he jotted down a teacher's comment about a student's awkwardness: "She looks like a dog pissing."

But the drawings Degas made backstage were few compared with the prodigious number he produced in his studio, where he paid petit rats and accomplished ballerinas to pose. In fact, Degas's studio was once visited by an inspector from the police morals unit,

wanting to know why so many little girls were coming and going. “Think of it!” writes the Opéra’s Martine Kahane. “The district of prostitutes and laundresses was alarmed!” Degas enjoyed the company of these dancers, who shared gossip with him as they posed, but his affection for them was paternal. Trying to advance the career of one young dancer, he wrote to Ludovic Halévy, “You must know what a dancer is like who wants you to put in a word for her. She comes back twice a day to know if one has seen, if one has written....And she wants it done at once. And she would like, if she could, to take you in her arms wrapped in a blanket and carry you to the Opéra!”

Unlike his brother Achille, who had an affair with a ballerina, Degas seems to have remained chaste and was, in the view of many, a misogynist. When told that a certain lady failed to show up at one of his dinners because she was “suffering,” he relayed her comment scornfully to a friend. “Wasn’t it true?” the friend asked. “How does one ever know?” retorted Degas. “Women invented the word ‘suffering.’” Yet he became close friends with a number of women, including painters Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, and some of the leading opera divas and prima ballerinas of the day. Later in life Degas gained a reputation as a recluse, even a misanthrope. This was partly because his eyesight began failing in the 1870s, a problem that often depressed him. But his biting wit helped to isolate him as well. “I am not a misanthrope, far from it,” he told Daniel Halévy in 1897, “but it is sad to live surrounded by scoundrels.” He could put people off—“I want people to believe me wicked,” he once declared—but he had misgivings about his attitude. In his 60s, he wrote to a friend, “I am meditating on the state of celibacy, and a good three quarters of what I tell myself is sad.”

The sketches Degas made in his studio and backstage at the Opéra were only the starting point for an artist who loved to experiment and rarely considered anything finished. He would make repeated tracings from his drawings as a way of correcting them, recalled Vollard. “He would usually make the corrections by beginning the new figure outside of the original outlines, the drawing growing larger and larger until a nude no bigger than a hand became life-size—only to be abandoned in the end.” The single figures in his sketches would show up in his paintings as part of a group, only to reappear in other scenes in other paintings.

When a friend taught him how to make a monotype print by drawing on an inked plate that was then run through a press, Degas at once did something unexpected. After making one print, he quickly made a second, faded impression from the leftover ink on the plate, then worked with pastels and gouache over this ghostly image. The result was an instant success—a collector bought the work, *The Ballet Master*, on the advice of Mary Cassatt.

More important, this technique gave Degas a new way to depict the artificial light of the stage. The soft colors of his pastels took on a striking luminosity when laid over the harsher black-and-white contrasts of the underlying ink. Degas showed at least five of these images in 1877 at the third Impressionist exhibition in Paris—a show that, art historian Charles Stuckey points out, included “the daring series of smoke-filled views inside the Gare St. Lazare by Monet and the large, sun-speckled group portrait at the *Moulin de la Galette* by Renoir.”

During the last 20 years of his career, Degas worked in a large fifth-floor studio in lower Montmartre above his living quarters and a private museum for his own art collection. Paul Valéry sometimes visited him there: “He would take me into a long attic room,” Valéry wrote, “with a wide bay window (not very clean) where light and dust mingled gaily. The room was pell-mell—with a basin, a dull zinc bathtub, stale bathrobes, a dancer modeled in wax with a real gauze tutu in a glass case, and easels loaded with charcoal sketches.” Valéry and other visitors also noticed stacks of paintings turned against the walls, a piano, double basses, violins and a scattering of ballet shoes

and dusty tutus. Prince Eugen of Sweden, who visited in 1896, “wondered how Degas could find any specific color in the jumble of crumbling pastels.”

The wax model of a dancer in a tutu standing in a glass case was undoubtedly Degas’s Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen. When it was first shown, at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, the work was adorned with a real costume and hair. Two-thirds life-size, it was too real for many viewers, who found her “repulsive,” a “flower of the gutter.” But in her pose Degas had caught the essence of classical ballet, beautifully illustrating an 1875 technique manual’s admonition that a ballerina’s “shoulders must be held low and the head lifted....” Degas never exhibited the Little Dancer again, keeping it in his studio among the many other wax models that he used for making new drawings. The sculpture was cast in bronze (some 28 are now known to exist) only after his death in 1917, at age 83.

The girl who posed for Degas’s Little Dancer, Marie van Goethem, lived near his studio and took classes at the Opéra’s ballet school. She was one of three sisters, all training to become ballerinas, and all apparently sketched by Degas. According to Martine Kahane, Marie passed all her early exams, rising from the ranks of petit rats to enter the corps de ballet at 15, a year after Degas made the sculpture. But only two years later, she was dismissed because she was late or absent at the ballet too often. Madame van Goethem, a widow who was working as a laundress, was apparently prostituting her daughters. In an 1882 newspaper clipping titled “Paris at Night,” Marie was said to be a regular at two all-night cafés, the Rat Mort and the brasserie des Martyrs, hangouts of artists, models, bohemians, journalists and worse. The writer continued, “Her mother...But no: I don’t want to say any more. I’d say things that would make one blush, or make one cry.” Marie’s older sister, Antoinette, was arrested for stealing money from her lover’s wallet at a bar called Le Chat Noir, and landed in jail for three months. The youngest sister, Charlotte, became a soloist with the Ballet and, it would be nice to think, lived happily ever after. But Marie seems to have disappeared without a trace.

Emile Zola made novels of such tales, and now the Opéra’s ballet master, Patrice Bart, 58, has turned Marie’s story into a modern ballet. For Bart, who joined the ballet school at age 10, it’s a labor of love. “A lot of the story took place in the Palais Garnier,” he says. “And I have been living in the Palais Garnier for 42 years. Voilà!” He won a place in the corps de ballet at 14, and became an étoile, or star, in his 20s. In the 1980s he danced for the company’s renowned director, Russian defector Rudolf Nureyev, and at age 40 he took on the role of ballet master and choreographer.

In his new ballet, Bart comes to grips with the same issue that confronted Degas: the synthesis of tradition and innovation. “I was a classical dancer,” he says, “and I try to move slightly toward the modern stuff.” Nureyev, he says, taught him to be aware of new ways of thinking, of dancing. “If you deny this, he believed, it will be the end of classical ballet. And that’s what Degas did, working in a classical world, but the painting was very modern.”

Bart’s ballet opens with a ballerina posed like the Little Dancer, encased in a glass box. The glass drops down and the Little Dancer comes to life, stepping into a montage of scenes from her story as well as Bart’s imagination. “There was no man in that story,” he says, “but to make a ballet you have to have a man and a lady, to make pas de deux, pas de trois. So I added the role of the abonné, the ideal masculine man.” In the ballet, the Little Dancer becomes an étoile before the evil mother corrupts her and she goes to prison. Throughout the piece, the dancers mix modern dance moves with their classical glissades and pirouettes. “And then,” says Bart, “in a classical ballet from the 19th century you always have the white act, what we call the ballet blanc. So I thought I’d make a scene where she becomes a laundress, and the stage is filled with white sheets, and she sort of fades out, as when people die.” As for Degas, he appears in Bart’s ballet

only as a mysterious, dark, top-hatted figure, like one of the abonnés he painted, wandering through the scenes. At the end of the ballet, the glass box comes up from the floor and the Little Dancer is once again trapped inside.

“I hope the ballet will bring Degas to life for young dancers now,” Bart says. “That’s why I created the role of the étoile, because it’s every little girl starting school, thinking maybe one day....And very few get there. I want to create the atmosphere of Degas, but not as in a museum. It’s like a painting coming to life.”

Degas would surely have loved to see these dancers at work on a ballet inspired by his creation. “With the exception of the heart, it seems to me that everything within me is growing old in proportion,” he wrote to a friend in January 1886. “And even this heart of mine has something artificial. The dancers have sewn it into a bag of pink satin, pink satin slightly faded, like their dancing shoes.”