

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Preview:  
Thursday, November 15, 1984  
10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

DEGAS: THE DANCERS  
To Go On View At  
National Gallery of Art

WASHINGTON, D. C. June 1, 1984. To mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of the nineteenth-century French master, Edgar Degas, this exhibition of approximately sixty works unites for the first time the artist's most important paintings and sculpture of ballet subjects together with pastels and drawings related to them. The exhibition concentrates on four groups of closely related objects, spanning the artist's mature career (1870-1900).

Degas: The Dancers, which goes on view November 22, 1984 through March 10, 1985 in the National Gallery's East Building, has been organized by George Shackelford, formerly a David E. Finley Fellow at the Gallery's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts and now Assistant Curator of European Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Mr. Shackelford has written the fully-illustrated exhibition catalogue.

Degas studied briefly at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1855 with Louis Lamothe (a follower of the Neoclassical painter Ingres) training to paint portraits and historic events. Degas, however, was far more intrigued by life in and around modern Paris---the opera, ballet, horse racing---subjects whose movement and color inspired him.

Degas is considered to be one of the greatest draftsman and, like Watteau before him, Degas made hundreds of drawings and pastels, accumulating a stockpile in his studio from which he selected figures for his major work. By seeing Degas' drawings with his paintings and sculpture the viewer will be able to study not only the relationship of works executed during the same period, but also foresee elements which appear in later works.

(more)

Orchestra of the Opera (1868, Musee d'Orsay, Galerie du Jeu de Paume), in the introductory section of the exhibition, demonstrates a number of elements characteristic of Degas' ballet pictures. The ballet in late nineteenth-century Paris was usually presented as a segment of the opera although full-length ballets were also produced. Most men of the Parisian upper-class attended the opera and were allowed to wander throughout the theater and to visit the dancers behind stage. Degas was intrigued by the spectators, musicians, and dancers and he recorded them from unusual points of view. In Orchestra of the Opera Degas' vantage point is the orchestra pit from which he saw musicians in the foreground, a patron viewing the ballet from a box, and the dancers on stage.

The first section of the exhibition is devoted to the dance rehearsal theme which became the best known treatment of Degas' ballet subjects. Included is one of the artist's most important works, The Dance Class, (1874-1876, Musee d'Orsay, Galerie du Jeu de Paume) a painting which he worked on during two distinct periods over two years. It is typical of Degas' rehearsal paintings as it shows dancers standing and sitting around the edges of the room while a few dancers appear to be exercising or practicing. A small cluster of women spectators (the mothers or guardians of the dancers) are seen in the background.

The painting originally depicted a dancer (leaning forward) as the focus of the composition; Degas later added the dance master, Jules Perrot. On view with The Dance Class are two portrait drawings of Perrot which are studies for the painting. Perrot appears in several other paintings as well as a monotype print, A Ballet Rehearsal (c. 1874) from the National Gallery's collection. This is the first of his prints in the monotype medium which he explored throughout the rest of his career.

The second section of the exhibition focuses on Degas' principal work in sculpture, Little Fourteen Year Old Dancer (c. 1881). The model for this work, Marie van Goethem, was a dance student at the Paris opera school. On view with the sculpture are five of the seven known drawings directly related to the statuette's pose. These drawings, along with catalogue information, make it possible to appreciate the evolution of the sculpture.

Degas employed an exaggeratedly long composition in a series of frieze-like rehearsal pictures executed from 1879 and continuing through the 1890s. In the third section there are nine such paintings and pastels which demonstrate this format. Two of these, the National Gallery's Before the Ballet and the Yale University Art Gallery's Ballet Rehearsal (both c. 1885-1890) demonstrate the artist's habitual re-use of entire compositions. X-radiographs, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, in fact prove that the composition of the two paintings was originally exactly the same and that Degas painted over what is now the Gallery's painting. The two works are still very similar and include a seated dancer adjusting her slipper. Degas often used this pose and four studies of related figures (drawings) will be on view among the dozen drawings in this section of the exhibition.

To conclude the exhibition, the fourth section focuses on Degas' very late works including the most monumental of his late oil paintings, Four Dancers (c. 1897, National Gallery of Art), three pastels and four charcoal drawings. Executed when Degas was an old man with failing eyesight, these powerful works show a more abstract quality. Again Degas' tendency to repeat and regroup figures is apparent. A small, tight, limited range of poses is used to control and concentrate his designs. He begins with forceful charcoal sketches to which he adds pastel pigments or works in oil paint on canvas to create elaborately finished works, which display not only his powerful draftsmanship but also his coloristic genius.

END