

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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DEGAS: THE DANCERS MARKS 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF FRENCH ARTIST'S BIRTH

WASHINGTON, D. C. October 29, 1984 The exhibition Degas: The Dancers goes on view in the National Gallery of Art's East Building November 22, 1984 through March 10, 1985. The exhibition will not travel.

Marking 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, with the pastels and drawings related to them. Spanning the artist's mature career (1870-1900), it concentrates on four groups of works---the dance rehearsals, sculpture, the friezelike compositions, and the more abstract, very late works.

The exhibition has been organized by George T. M. 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 trained briefly at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1855 with Louis Lamothe (a follower of the neoclassical painter Ingres), studying the academic method of portraiture and history painting. However, he was far more intrigued by life in and around modern Paris---its cafés, shopgirls, racecourses and above all, the Opera ballet.

Degas is considered to be one of the greatest draftsmen and, like Watteau before him, made hundreds of drawings and pastels, accumulating in his studio a corpus from which he selected poses. By seeing Degas' drawings with his paintings and sculpture, the

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viewer will be able to study not only the relationship of works executed during the same period, but also foresee elements that recur in the artist's oeuvre.

The Orchestra of the Opera (1868, Musée d'Orsay, Galerie du Jeu de Paume), in the introductory section of the exhibition, reveals a number of elements that were to appear repeatedly in Degas' subsequent depictions of the ballet. In late nineteenth-century Paris the ballet was usually presented as a segment of an opera, though 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 visit the dancers backstage. Degas was intrigued by the spectators, musicians, and dancers and he recorded them from unusual points of view. In Orchestra of the Opera the vantage point is the orchestra pit, from which one can see 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 (c. 1875, Musée d'Orsay, Galerie du Jeu de Paume), a painting on which he worked 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 drawings of Perrot that predate the painting. Perrot appears in several other paintings as well as in a monotype print, The Ballet Master (c. 1874) from the National Gallery's collection. This is the first of Degas' 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, The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer (c. 1881, from the Virginia Museum of Art, Richmond). 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 statue's pose. These drawings, along with catalogue information, make it possible to appreciate the evolution of the sculpture.

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

Degas' very late works are the focus of the last section of the exhibition, which includes the most monumental of his late oil paintings, Four Dancers (c. 1895-1900, National Gallery of Art), three pastels, and four charcoal drawings. Executed when Degas was an old man with failing eyesight, these powerful works are more abstract in form. Again the artist's tendency to repeat and regroup figures is apparent. He used a small, tight, limited range of poses to control and concentrate his designs. In forceful charcoal sketches, to which he added pastel pigments, or with oil paint on canvas, he created works that display not only his powerful draftsmanship but also his coloristic genius.

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