

Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917)

The artwork of Edgar Degas combines classical style elements with the modern achievements of the impressionist movement.

Edgar Degas was born in Paris as the son of a wealthy banker. He studied art at the famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After having finished his studies he went to Italy where he stayed for five years studying and copying meticulously the old masters of the Renaissance. His decision to study the old masters was typical for his personality - that of a perfectionist. Degas eventually ended his efforts at history painting and devoted more attention to portraiture, turning images of relatives and friends into complex psychological studies.

Degas is best known as an Impressionist and was a prominent member, if not the strongest promoter, of the group. He was outspoken about the need for artists to join together and establish a place for themselves as proponents of a new, contemporary artistic sensibility. Degas organized what is now known as the first Impressionist exhibition and planned many of the subsequent shows. He initially called himself and his compatriots “realists”, which pointed to their interest in drawing inspiration from their own environments and experiences. The term “impressionist” was adopted later, at the time of the third Impressionist exhibition, despite Degas’s objections to the name. Degas allied himself with other Impressionists, such as Pissarro, met with them at the famous Café Guerbois, and participated in all but one of the eight Impressionist exhibitions.

Degas in contrast to his impressionist colleagues, he preferred to work in a studio. He made sketches of his subjects on the spot and created the painting later in his studio. Toulouse-Lautrec, who was a great admirer of Edgar Degas, had the same work style.

Japanese prints were very popular at the end of the nineteenth century and had a great influence on the French impressionists. Edgar Degas was one of the admirers of Japanese prints. The influence can be seen in some of his daring compositions using large areas of flat colors.

Degas was an artist torn between traditional art and the modern impressionist movement. He admired the French artist Ingres and the great Italian painters. His own compositions of images are harmonious and follow the traditions of the old masters. What often looks like the spontaneous sketch of a genial moment, was in reality the elaborate result of a perfectionist. From the impressionists such as Manet, Monet and Renoir he had learned the use of creating effects with light, a daring use of colors and new ways to show the human figure in motion. And from the Japanese ukiyo-e masters he had learned the use of space.

During the 1870s and 1880s Degas focused his attention on subjects that were familiar to him and which reflected his contemporary environment. He painted milliners waiting on bourgeois women, laundresses ironing, and performers at the Opéra. Degas became most famous for his countless images of female dancers practicing backstage. Specifically, he focused on their gestures and poses as they practiced, waited, primped, and stretched in the rehearsal room. Finally, during the latter part of his career, he painted the controversial scenes of women bathing.

As Degas’s subject matter became more contemporary, so did his artistic style. Early on, Degas presents people as individuals, whereas works from the mid-1870s were categorized by women in particular according to their professions. The laundresses, milliners, and dancers represent types rather than specific individuals. Degas’s handling of paint and use of color also become bolder and more experimental. He collaborated with Pissarro and Cassatt on various experiments in the realm of graphic design, particularly in the production of monotypes using new and diverse techniques. His

first personal exhibition, which was held at the Durand-Ruel gallery in 1892, consisted of an extraordinary series of semi-abstract monotypes with enhanced colors representing mysterious landscapes. Besides such landscapes his style wasn't to change dramatically from then on. This was undoubtedly to some extent due to his failing eyesight, the first signs of which manifested themselves during the Franco-Prussian war. In fact he believed himself to be slowly going blind from then on.. But this didn't interrupt his work and his images after 1900 appeared to be possessed of an increasing power, as if his deteriorating sight served only to increase his other senses. Renoir was to maintain that "Degas painted his best things when he couldn't see any more". Degas himself gave another explanation for the mysterious power of his later works: "It's one thing to copy what one sees, but it's much better to draw what can only be seen in one's memory. It's a transformation during which the imagination collaborates with the memory ... there your recollections and fantasies are freed from the tyranny exerted by nature".

Degas continued to struggle against his blindness and worked up to about 1912 when, on the advice of his friend Suzanne Valadon, he was forced to leave his apartment in Rue Victor-Massé where he had lived for the past quarter century and move to a more convenient address at 6, Boulevard de Clichy. But it proved to be an ordeal from which he never fully recovered and, despite the huge international success and high prices commanded by his works from 1900 onwards, he became sad and indifferent to the glory. He died on 27th September 1917 during the wartime, making his death go almost unnoticed by the world - although perhaps a fitting end for the man who had once said "I would like to be famous but unknown!" He was buried in the cemetery of Montmartre.