The Dancers and Degas

Text and selected images from the The Dancers and Degas Web feature

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The Dancers and Degas

Edgar Degas

“Yesterday I spent the whole day in the studio of a strange painter called Degas. After a great many essays and experiments and trial shots in all directions, he has fallen in love with modern life, and out of all the subjects in modern life he has chosen washerwomen and ballet-dancers. When you come to think of it, it is not a bad choice.”

[Edmond de Goncourt, 13 February 1874]

Who is Edgar Degas?

Self-Portrait, possibly 1854
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil on paper, laid down on canvas; 16 x 13 1/2 in. (40.6 x 34.3 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Stephen C. Clark, 1960 (61.101.6)

Early Life

Hilaire-Germaine-Edgar Degas (DAY-GAH) was born on July 19, 1834, in Paris, France. The oldest child in a large family, he had three brothers and two sisters. His father, Auguste, was born in Naples, Italy, into a family of wealthy bankers; his mother, Celestine, was an American from New Orleans. Degas attended school at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, studying French literature, Latin, and Greek. He went on to study at the École des Beaux-Arts and often visited the Louvre museum to examine and copy the art of the old masters. In this self-portrait, he depicts himself in an artist’s smock, with his face partly shadowed. The clear outlines of his face reveal his admiration of Ingres, and his intense gaze suggests the earlier self-portraits of Rembrandt.

Degas and the Impressionists

Degas became part of a group of artists who were creating a new style of painting. They painted scenes of modern life instead of historical or mythological subjects, preferred to paint out-of-doors instead of in a studio, and used bright colors and broken brushwork. Art critic Louis Leroy sarcastically called these painters “Impressionists,” referring to the sketchlike appearance of their paintings. Degas helped to organize the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 and participated in six of their eight exhibitions, but remained always independent in character and rarely worked out-of-doors. Instead, his pictures were based on memory or sketches. Degas, however, shared the Impressionists’ interest in the effects of light and movement, as well as in subjects drawn from daily life. He also enjoyed hosting studio visits for artist friends such as Mary Cassatt, Édouard Manet, and Paul Gauguin.

Man of Many Media

Degas loved to travel and took long trips within France as well as to Italy and New Orleans. Wherever he went, he made many drawings and notes in his sketchbooks of the landscape, art, and architecture. He mastered a variety of media, including oil, pastel, printmaking, sculpture, and photography. Degas suffered from eye trouble and was nearly blind by 1898. In the 1890s, his painting became increasingly free in style and bright in color, and he focused more on sculpture. He died in 1917 at the age of eighty-three.

Why did he like to draw and paint dancers?

The Dance Class, probably 1874
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil on canvas; 32 3/4 x 30 1/4 in. (83.2 x 76.8 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham, 1986 (1987.47.1)
Degas would often invite ballet dancers to his studio in order to sketch, paint, and sculpt them as they stretched, practiced, and danced. Later in his career, he was allowed backstage to sketch rehearsals and performances. Degas enjoyed drawing the dancers’ movements, their colorful costumes, the sets, and the effects of the stage lights.

In his drawing and painting Degas often experimented with ideas he borrowed from Japanese prints, such as highly patterned areas contrasted with planes (flat surfaces) of color, and unusual viewpoints of interior spaces. He used large, empty spaces to move our eyes deep into the picture and give us a sense of movement. He would cut figures off at the edges of the canvas to make the picture look more natural and less posed (like a snapshot of people in motion). Degas used photography as a way to record what people looked like and would refer to the photographs when he painted portraits.

Why did he make sculptures?

The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, executed ca. 1880; cast in 1922
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); cast by A. A. Hébrard in Paris, France
Bronze, partially tinted, with cotton skirt and satin hair-ribbon; wood base; (without base) 39 in. (99.1 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.370)

Degas made sculptures to help him study how a person’s muscles and skeleton worked in different kinds of poses and movements. At Degas’s death in 1917, there were more than 150 sculptures in his studio, mostly made out of wax and bits of modeling clay over wire and wood armatures, which served as a kind of skeleton that supported the wax layer. These wax and wire sculptures could be easily changed and moved, like three-dimensional sketches.

Where Can I Find Degas at the Met?
You can find many beautiful paintings, pastels, and sculptures by Degas in the Nineteen-Century European Paintings and Sculpture Galleries on the second floor of the Museum. You might be surprised how many works by Degas you can find at the Met. Degas was a mentor and friend to the American painter Mary Cassatt, who persuaded the Havemeyer family to collect many of his works. The Havemeyers gave them to the Met in 1924, so the works of art could be enjoyed by more people.
Look Closely

The Dancing Class, probably 1871
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil on wood; 7 3/4 x 10 5/8 in. (19.7 x 27 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.184)

Where are the contrasts of light and dark?

Where are the verticals?

Where are the diagonals?

Where are the reflections?

Is there a balance of full and empty spaces?

Try This! Create a drawing

Look in a mirror and with a pencil and paper try to draw the shirt, jacket, or dress that you are wearing. Notice the way the fabric wrinkles and folds against your body. Notice the shading, the dark and light places, where the light falls and creates shadows. Try to capture the light, shadows, decoration, and the texture of the fabric in your drawing. You can do this by pressing down hard on the pencil to create dark blacks, then lifting up the pencil to create fine lines; you can also use “cross-hatching,” or overlapping lines in small areas, like dense tic-tac-toe squares: more dark lines make dark shadows; fewer fine lines make lighter shadows. Hang your drawing on the wall when you are finished, stand back, and notice how the drawing looks like the fabric of your clothing.
The Dance Class, probably 1874
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil on canvas; 32 3/4 x 30 1/4 in. (83.2 x 76.8 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham, 1986 (1987.47.1)

Where has Degas used vertical lines?

What shapes are repeated?

How many different poses can you find?

How does Degas lead your eye from the front, to the middle, to the back of the scene?

Can you find the places where Degas used light and reflections?

Try this! Move the dancers

Print out this image, then take a piece of tracing paper and a pencil and trace over one of the figures in this painting. Then trace a figure from another part of the painting, placing it next to your first figure. Repeat this until you have moved the dancers around; you can also change the placement of the walls and the floor, if you wish.

Degas used this method to try out different compositions (the layout or design of the painting) and to form ideas for other works of art. He would trace images over and over to experiment with the colors and forms and the arrangement of the dancers.

Degas would tell young artists who visited him in his studio: “Make a drawing, begin it again, trace it, begin it again, and retrace it.”

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The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage, probably 1874
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil colors freely mixed with turpentine, with traces of watercolor and pastel over pen-and-ink drawing on cream-colored wove paper, laid down on bristol board and mounted on canvas; 21 3/8 x 28 3/4 in. (54.3 x 73 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Gift of Horace Havemeyer, 1929 (29.160.26)

What are the clues that this is a rehearsal, not a real performance?

How can you tell which ballerinas are dancing and which are not?

How does Degas make the space look deep?

Which shapes are repeated?

Where are the areas of light and dark?

Can you tell where Degas was in relation to the stage?

What images have been cut off at the edges of the canvas?

Try this! Create your own art
On a table, set up a still life arrangement with toys, flowers, books, fruit, or a pretty bowl. Then set up a light nearby, like a floor lamp or table lamp, so that your still life is lit dramatically with areas of bright light and deep shadow. On a piece of paper, lay out the areas of light and shadow with your pencil, using the side of your pencil or cross-hatching (see the explanation under The Dancing Class) to create dark areas.
Over this composition, layer other materials such as watercolor paint or pastels.
Notice in *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage* the way that Degas used different materials to create texture, color, and depth. Stand back and look at your art every now and then, so that you can see where additional color is needed.
Dancers Practicing at the Bar, 1877
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Mixed media on canvas; 29 3/4 x 32 in. (75.6 x 81.3 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.34)

How does Degas convey the sense of action?

How many points of view are used in this picture: one or two?

Where is the shape of the watering can repeated?

Can you find the diagonals?

Where are the areas of light and shadow?

Are the upper and lower parts of the composition balanced?

Try this! Make the room change
Print out this image. Then take a piece of tracing paper and a pencil and draw over the
lines and shapes. Notice how the lines and shapes create the sense of space in the room.
Then erase your pencil marks and experiment with shortening or lengthening the lines and
shapes. Notice how the space contracts or expands depending upon the lines and shapes
used. Also notice how the figures in the room look closer or farther away depending on
the length of your lines and the size and placement of the shapes. This is called
“perspective.”
The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, 19th–20th century (executed ca. 1880; cast in 1922)
By Edgar Degas (1834–1917); Cast by A. A. Hébrard
French (Paris); Made in Paris, France
Bronze, partially tinted, with cotton skirt and satin hair-ribbon; wood base; H. (w/out base) 39 in. (99.1 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H.O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.370)

What is her expression?

How many colors can you find?

Try this! Can you stand like Marie?
Here the dancer is posing in a “casual fourth position,” with her right foot turned out to the side, straightened left leg bearing her weight, her back arched, head tilted up, and her hands clasped together behind her back. Do you think that it would be easy to hold this pose for several hours, as Marie did, while the artist worked? Try it and see what you think. How does your body feel?
A Day with Degas

Hi, my name’s Marie. I’m a ballerina, and I posed for the great artist Edgar Degas. He lived in Paris in the nineteenth century and the ballet was his favorite subject. Let’s explore the world of the dancer in works by Degas at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. We’ll be joined by some of my friends who work at the Met and a pair of dancers: Faith, a student at the School of American Ballet, and my special guest Tom Gold, a dancer with the New York City Ballet.

Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer

The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, executed ca. 1880; cast in 1922
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); cast by A. A. Hébrard in Paris, France
Bronze, partially tinted, with cotton skirt and satin hair-ribbon; wood base; (without base) 39 in. (99.1 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.370)

Let me tell you about the day Tom took Faith to see another young ballerina at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

At the Museum they met Tom’s friend Felicia, whose job is to teach visiting students all about works of art. She took them through the Great Hall of the Museum and up to the second floor, where they were surrounded by many beautiful paintings of ballerinas. “Are you familiar with the works of Edgar Degas?” Felicia asked Faith. “I’ve heard of him,” Faith replied, “and I’ve seen a few of his works. And I have a bag with one of his paintings on it.” “Well, these galleries are filled with paintings, drawings, pastels, and sculptures by Edgar Degas,” said Felicia. “Let’s take look at this sculpture he made of a young dancer.”
“Faith, how old are you?” “I’m fourteen,” Faith replied. “Well,” said Felicia, “if you look at the label on the pedestal, it says ‘The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer.’ Her name was Marie van Goethem. She was a ballet student at the Paris Opéra and she lived near Degas’s studio. She made some extra money for her family by posing for him.”

“Faith, what’s your first impression of this sculpture? Do you think Marie was thinking about what she’s doing? Faith looked closely at Marie’s face. “I think it probably took a really long time to make this sculpture. After a while she was probably just standing there waiting for Degas to finish. Probably she was just hoping not to move or mess up.”

Faith took the same pose as Marie. “She’s in fourth position, but it’s a relaxed fourth position. Her feet aren’t crossed over. And her weight is on her left foot. Your weight is supposed to be evenly distributed on both feet, so you don’t fall over.”

“Judging from her outfit and her hairstyle, I don’t think she’s about to perform onstage,” Faith continued. “Her hair is down, and she’s wearing a casual ballet outfit. Maybe she’s practicing or in the dressing room preparing herself.”

“Do you wear that kind of outfit to class?” asked Felicia. “No,” replied Faith. “On occasion—for pointe class—we’re allowed to wear short skirts. My everyday dance outfit is pink tights and a navy blue leotard. I wear my hair up in a bun. The navy blue leotard is the color worn by students at my level. Different levels wear different colors.”

Felicia asked Faith when she started taking dance classes. “I started pre-ballet when I was three,” Faith answered, “after my dad gave me tickets to go with my grandmother to see Coppélia. I saw all those girls in pretty pink tutus and said to my father, ‘Daddy I want to do that!’ He said maybe I could start taking dance classes when I got a little older, but I said, ‘No, I want to do that now!’” Felicia laughed, “That’s a very positive answer!” “Now I go to dance class six days a week,” said Faith. “And Faith has performed in Coppélia,” said Tom, “just as she dreamed when she was three-years-old!”

Just then Felicia spotted another friend closely examining some paintings. She called him over to the sculpture and introduced him to Faith and Tom. “Gary is the curator in charge of these galleries. He’s been studying and writing about Degas for a long time. Gary, I’ve heard this sculpture caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in Paris in 1881. Would you tell us why?”

“Well, it’s hard to see today what all the commotion was about back then,” Gary replied. “The sculpture visitors saw at the 1881 exhibition was something that looked more like a Madame Tussaud waxwork. The figure of the dancer was made of wax and
the face was painted. It had real straw-colored hair, a real yellow velvet bodice, a real white tutu, and real pink satin slippers.”

Faith was surprised, “People didn’t like the sculpture?” “They thought the dancer wasn’t pretty,” Gary replied. “These young dancers at the Paris Opéra came almost exclusively from the lower classes and to make money their mothers put them into rigorous dance training very early, probably too early. And the older male patrons of the Paris Opéra often took advantage of them. The art critics knew that the life of a ‘little rat,’ as these young dancers were called, was not very pretty. So, to the critics, this sculpture of one of the ‘little rats’ was not very pretty. I see something different in her face,” Gary said. “I look at her face and see the pride she takes in her talent as a dancer. She seems to be closing her eyes in satisfaction.”

Faith pondered the expression on the face of the bronze dancer and recognized that expression of confidence. Then something occurred to her. “If Degas exhibited a wax sculpture, why is this sculpture made of bronze?”

“Good question!” said Gary. “The wax sculpture was cast in bronze after Degas died. Throughout his entire career Degas sculpted in wax. He loved its pliability. Also, if he was dissatisfied with something he could just roll it up into a ball and start all over again. Starting all over again was a pleasure for him, more than admiring a finished object.”

“Degas’s good friends Bartholomé, the sculptor, and Mary Cassatt, the American painter, wanted to preserve his wax sculptures. They were already disintegrating in the artist’s studio when he died in 1917. This particular bronze sculpture happens to be the very first one that was made. It was very expensive to make bronze sculptures at the time, right after the First World War. There was very little metal available in Europe and there was a big economic depression.

Mrs. Havemeyer, who was a great patron of art and the best friend of Mary Cassatt, paid for the casting of the bronzes. Twenty-six sets were cast and Mrs. Havemeyer bought the first complete set. She gave her set to the Metropolitan Museum. It’s thanks to Mrs. Havemeyer that today we can all enjoy this sculpture of a fourteen-year-old dancer and the other sculptures by Degas you see in these galleries.”

“By the way, there’s something about this sculpture that most people don’t know because only specially-trained Museum staff are allowed to touch it. Degas made little culottes for the wax sculpture of this dancer. She wasn’t just wearing a tutu, but she was wearing drawers, too! And they’re still there, under the tutu. In some of Degas’s paintings as well, you can see the dancers wearing something like boxer shorts with a little lace trim under their knee-length tutus.”
“Faith,” asked Felicia, “how would you like to look if a sculpture were made of you?” “I’d like to wear a long romantic-style tutu,” Faith replied, “and I’d pose like this, with one arm up, looking up at my hand.” They all agreed it was a lovely pose for a fourteen-year-old dancer.
What can a dancer teach us about Degas? Felicia, a teacher at the Met, let Tom Gold be the instructor as she and Faith stopped to enjoy one of my favorite paintings by Degas.

“Let’s take a look at Degas’s *The Dance Class* from 1874,” Felicia said. “Tom, Degas’s paintings almost always depict behind the scenes, the rehearsals and the classes. Why do you suppose this was more interesting to him?”

Tom thought for a moment, and then replied, “As an artist, Degas was probably more interested in exploring the work that goes into making the illusion. At a ballet performance everything is beautiful, no one seems to make any mistakes, no one seems to sweat, no one seems to be upset. Everything seems almost effortless. But there’s another side to it—a performance is the product of many, many years of preparation. Degas wanted to show the hard work behind the perfection.”

“Even though the painting shows many ballerinas and bystanders,” Tom continued, “we focus on two figures—one is the only man in the painting, and the other is the ballerina in the center. The man is Jules Perrot, a famous dancer and dance master at the Paris Opéra Ballet. He was the trainer, the teacher, and the mentor of these young ballerinas. To me it seems that Perrot might have been walking through the room as a girl was practicing a move and she caught his eye. He might have just turned to look at her and said ‘maybe you should try it this way.’”
Felicia couldn’t quite place the movement performed by the dancer in the center and asked Tom to identify it for her. “It looks like she’s in the middle of executing a combination, Felicia,” Tom answered, “and at the moment she’s sur la pointe—on her toes. Her raised leg is bent at a right angle, that’s an attitude back position. You can see from the angle of her head and her arms that she’s executing this step in succession with other steps. You get the idea she’s moving.”

A lot of things about Degas’s Dance Class were very familiar to Faith, but she wondered how the training of these ballerinas might have differed from her training as a dancer today. “Unlike most young dancers in the United States today, the dancers at the Paris Opéra Ballet began fairly rigorous training very young—maybe four or five years old,” said Tom. “They took classes throughout the year and then took an exam to go on to the next level. If they didn’t pass the exam, they would most likely be asked to leave the school and find another profession. Like promising dancers today, they were judged for their natural ability probably even more than for what they could be taught. Did their feet point and flex properly? Did they have the correct leg and torso proportions? Were they properly aligned? Did they have a natural jump or elevation?”

Gary, the curator in charge of the Degas paintings, joined the small group in front of the painting. He has seen Tom dance on the stage and asked him how he became a dancer. “I began taking dance lessons when I was five,” answered Tom. “But I didn’t start with ballet; I started with tap dancing, as most American male dancers do. It’s much easier to start with tap or jazz than ballet. I came to New York in 1987 to study at the School of American Ballet, which is the affiliated school of the New York City Ballet. I was there for six months and then joined the corps de ballet and worked my way up to principal dancer.”

Felicia remarked, “I’ve always wondered. In 1874 there were male dancers, but there are no male students shown in the painting. Why?” “Men take class separately,” said Tom, “because men and women dancers are trained very differently. Our bodies are different. Male dancers are more athletic; we’re known for our jumps, our virtuoso turns. Women mostly work on precision footwork, going on their toes—pointe work, their port de bras—the carriage of their arms.”

“Today, at the professional level, men and women take class together,” he continued. “But when you start out, there’s a boys’ class and a girls’ class. At the School of American Ballet, when students are fourteen or fifteen, once a week they have a partnering class—a pas de deux class. But this is only after they’re comfortable enough with themselves and their own techniques that they can feel confident in lifting, or being lifted by, another dancer.”

“There’s such a profusion of wonderful white tutus in the painting,” Felicia remarked. “These aren’t the tutus I see when I go to the ballet today. Would you tell us
about the costumes the ballerinas in this painting are wearing?”  “Dancers don’t wear tutus for class anymore,” Tom said. “But in Degas’s day, the advanced dancers always wore tutus in the classroom. I’m assuming they did this so they would know how to move in a tutu on the stage, which is very different from moving in a leotard or a long gown. The ballet originated in the French court of Louis XIV, when huge gowns were fashionable. Ballet dancers then just showed the calves, ankles, and feet. Louis XIV was very proud of his calves and liked to show them off dancing. That’s why it’s believed he’s responsible for the ballet stance we call ‘the turnout,’ in which the legs are rotated outwards to display the calves.”

“The costumes in Degas’s day helped create the illusion that was desired at the time—romantic and feminine,” Tom continued. “But you couldn’t move so well in the long tutus, and you also couldn’t see the dancer’s movement so well. The long tutu covers a lot. As ballerinas wanted to raise their legs higher and move faster, the tutus were made shorter. Along with grace and style, today’s dancer has a lot of power and strength. Nowadays you want to see the shape of the body and the precision of the movement, so we wear a leotard.”

Pointing out that all Degas’s dancers were wearing black ribbons around their necks, Tom explained. “The choker was in style during this period, but it also gives the dancer the desired appearance of an elongated neck. The reason a ballerina wears her hair in a bun on top of her head is to create a ‘giraffe effect’ that gives the ballerina a long, lean look. You can always pick out a ballerina on the street by her posture, her neck, and her head.”

“The dancer’s shoes don’t look quite like the ones that I wear,” remarked Faith. “The shoes actually have changed a lot,” said Tom. “The shoes worn by Degas’s ballerinas were a much softer satin than today’s shoes. The modern pointe shoe is one of the reasons why dancers can do much more these days. It has a sort of round button at the tip, which is very solid; it’s made of wood. There’s also a lot of glue in the toe of the modern shoe. A lot of ballerinas nowadays will also put shellac in the toes of their shoes. This will make the shoes last at least three performances, where before they would break after only one performance.” “In Degas’s day, pointe shoes were just satin with maybe a suede sole. So when the ballerinas went up on pointe, they were really using the muscles in their feet. They were really on their toes, which was excruciatingly painful. They couldn’t do what dancers today can do; they had no support. So the shoes and the costumes evolved with changes in the dance.”

Felicia pointed to a corner of the painting. “In the left foreground we can see a music stand with a score, a bass viol resting on the floor, and perhaps a piano, although it isn’t very clear. Are these instruments normal accompaniment when you take class? Nowadays we have a pianist who plays for a class,” Tom replied. “In Degas’s day, at
the Paris Opéra Ballet, I believe they had violin accompaniment for their classes and rehearsals.”

Tom pointed to some of the women background wearing regular street clothes. “I’m sure these women are what would be called “stage mothers” today,” said Tom. “They’re gossiping, pointing out which girls they think will succeed, trying to get Monsieur Perrot to notice their daughters. A lot of times they have their knitting or their needlework, to occupy their time. If this were a rehearsal, or even a more formal class, Monsieur Perrot would make them wait somewhere else.” Tom pointed to one of the dancers in the painting, “If you notice, some of the girls have their hair down. That makes me think we’re looking at dancers in a preparatory room getting ready for a class or rehearsal, and not in the actual class or rehearsal.”

“There are things about the scene that make me think that Degas was not actually a witness to this class”, Tom said. “I think the ballerina in the center probably wouldn’t be performing like this—in front of all the other ballerinas—for Monsieur Perrot. And I don’t think the other dancers would be so relaxed with the ballet master around.”

“You’re right,” said Gary. “Degas took photographs. He used a photograph of the dance master, Jules Perrot, who didn’t pose for him. And he had several dancers pose in his studio, in these positions. Degas was a great student of the ballet, and something of a critic of dance technique. He would annotate his drawings of the dancers with comments like “third position, badly executed.””
Ballet Slippers

Dancers Practicing at the Bar, 1877
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Mixed media on canvas; 29 3/4 x 32 in. (75.6 x 81.3 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.34)

Can you solve the mystery of this painting? I’ll tell you how Faith learned how to be an art detective with a little help from Gary and Tom.

Stopping in front of a beautiful picture of ballerinas painted in buttery-yellow tones, Gary turned to Faith and said, “Take a look this painting called Dancers Practicing at the Bar. Degas shows a watering can on the floor next to the ballerinas. Is there a watering can on the floor of your classroom?” “No, but I think I understand why it might be there,” Faith said. “Leather-soled ballet shoes are very slippery on a wood floor. If you put a little water on the bottom of your shoes, it actually makes them less slippery.”

Tom was very impressed with his young friend. “That’s right,” he said. “You’ll see a watering can in some of these ballet paintings by Degas because the floors were made of wood, and when the wood dries it becomes very slippery. Before each class, one of the dancers would sprinkle water all over the floor, which would prevent slipping and make traction much easier. Nowadays we crack a substance called resin with the toes of our shoes; it becomes powdery and prevents slipping. And there are some dancers who take Coca Cola diluted with water and pour it on the stage floor, which makes it sticky, and they don’t slip. If you go to the Kirov or Bolshoi in Russia, where they still have the traditional wood floors, you’ll see a young dancer with a watering can sprinkling water all over the floor to this day.”

Gary, who knew all Degas’s tricks, asked Faith to take a closer look at the watering can. She looked at the watering can for a moment, and then looked back at Gary. It looked pretty ordinary to her. “It’s just an ordinary watering can,” said Gary, “but see
how Degas uses the spout and handle to mirror the pose of one of the dancers?" "Yes, I see it now!" exclaimed Faith.

Tom noticed something unusual in the area of the watering can. "Gary, do you know why Degas put his signature in the middle of the painting, by the watering can, instead of on the bottom?" Gary answered, "Degas was very specific about his placement of signatures, and sometimes he changed his mind as he was working on a painting. He’d try one place, then he’d rework the painting some more and say to himself, ‘No, no, I want the signature here now.’ The signature brings us back again to the watering can," said Gary. "It’s as if the watering can is saying ‘Degas.’ Even though the two dancers are on the right, our eye keeps moving over to the watering can and the signature. It’s sort of funny that Degas insists on pulling us back to the watering can."

Gary continued, "The first owner of this painting was a good friend of Degas’s, Henri Rouart. He was a scientist and inventor, but also an amateur painter. He had this painting in his living room and it was one of his most prized possessions. Degas was a frequent guest at Rouart’s home and one time he said, ‘Oh, just give me the painting back, this joke is a bad joke, and I’m tired of looking at the watering can. Let me take it home, I want to fix the painting.’ Rouart, who had seen Degas ruin a number of paintings because he wanted to rework them, supposedly chained the painting to the wall. He might not have actually chained it to the wall, but he certainly wouldn’t let Degas take it home with him.” “I’ve read that Degas had a terrible reputation for taking paintings back and fiddling with them,” said Felicia. “And not giving them back,” Gary added, “you’d never see them again!”
Things to Do

Gesture Drawing

**Materials:**
- Drawing paper
- Pencil

A gesture drawing portrays the main bodily movements that the person is performing, it isn’t meant to look like the person. Print out *The Dance Class*, 1874, and look at the painting closely. Try to describe the various poses of the dancers by making quick pencil sketches.

Posers
(an activity for younger children)

**Materials:**
- Chenille stems (use the long ones longer ones)
- Heavy cardboard
Degas made sculptures to help him study how a person’s muscles and skeleton worked in different kinds of poses and movements. These sculptures were mostly made out of wax and bits of modeling clay over wire and wood armatures so they could be easily changed and moved, like three-dimensional sketches.

Make your own three-dimensional “action figure” using these simple instructions.

For each of these three sections, take two chenille stems and twist them together.

• Use one twisted pair of chenille stems to form the figure’s torso, making an oval shape at the top for the head.

• To make the legs, take another twisted pair of chenille stems and place it close to the bottom of the torso, leaving enough of the torso pipe cleaner to twist around the legs to hold them in place.

• Take the last twisted pair of chenille stems and wrap it around the torso to form the figure’s arms.

• To make the figure stand up, staple one or both of the legs to a piece of heavy cardboard.

• Bend the figure into different poses.

• Get adventurous! Use chenille stems to add tutus and tiaras to your poser.

For Parents and Teachers

The Life of an Artist

Materials:

Sketchbook, pencil
8 ½ x 11 sheet of tracing paper
8 ½ x 11 sheet of heavy drawing paper
Optional: pen and ink, watercolors, pastels, colored pencils

• Give each student/child a sketchbook and ask him/her to start drawing images from daily life, such as their pets, family members, friends, animals, people on the bus or subway or in the park, and trees or landscapes, houses, rooms and boats, cars or other vehicles.
• Ask the students/children to try to make at least one detailed pencil drawing a day. The students/children should not be concerned with perfection, or erasing: tell them the purpose is to make a daily record of the world around them.

• When the students/children have fifteen to twenty pages of drawings, give them a large sheet of tracing paper. On the tracing paper help them draw a rectangular frame using a ruler, this will give them a contained space to set up their composition.

• Then ask them to pick one of their favorite drawings in their sketchbook and then trace over the drawing on to the large sheet of tracing paper, inside the rectangle. Then ask them to pick another drawing from their sketchbook and add it to the last one on the same paper. Help them place the figures, animals, or other elements in the rectangle, so that they can create a composition.

• Tell them that artists make many choices when planning and creating a work of art. Discuss aspects of composition and perspective, and help them create an image that has depth. Look at Degas’s paintings for inspiration.

• When the students/children have a finished composition on the tracing paper, give them a large sheet of drawing paper. Ask the students to cover the back of the tracing paper with dark lines of graphite from their pencils, until the back of the paper is quite black.

• Then they should lay the tracing paper over the clean sheet of drawing paper, black side down, drawing side up. The students/children should draw with a pencil over their drawings on the tracing paper: their marks will transfer to the new sheet of paper. On this new drawing they can layer other materials such as pen and ink, pastels, watercolor, or acrylic paint until it is finished.

• Help the students/children hang up the finished art in a large room or hallway to create a gallery. Invite their friends and family to an art opening and ask each artist discuss her/his work.

Write a story!

• Print out copies of The Dance Class, 1874, so that each child/student can look at the painting closely. Ask the children/students some questions to get them thinking, such as whether they have ever taken a test. How did it feel? How did they feel before and after the test? Ask the students/children to write down some words that describe those feelings (play music to help them think, such as Mozart, Brahms, or Tchaikovsky).
• The students/children should use the painting as inspiration for an original story; have them think of the place, people, clothing and atmosphere and write descriptions for the story. Then ask the students/children to write a story about this painting, choosing one of the people in the image to be their main character. They can also write the story from more than one point of view, such as a waiting family member, the ballet master, and a ballet student.

• Then ask the students/children to read their stories to the class. The students/children can print out their stories, bind them together to create a book of short stories and share them with friends and family.
The Dancing Class, probably 1871; Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); Oil on wood; 7 3/4 x 10 5/8 in. (19.7 x 27 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.184)
The Dance Class, probably 1874; Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); Oil on canvas; 32 3/4 x 30 1/4 in. (83.2 x 76.8 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham, 1986 (1987.47.1)
The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage, probably 1874; Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); Oil colors freely mixed with turpentine, with traces of watercolor and pastel over pen-and-ink drawing on cream-colored wove paper, laid down on bristol board and mounted on canvas; 21 3/8 x 28 3/4 in. (54.3 x 73 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Gift of Horace Havemeyer, 1929 (29.160.26)
Dancers Practicing at the Bar. 1877; Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); Mixed media on canvas; 29 3/4 x 32 in. (75.6 x 81.3 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.34)
The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer, executed ca. 1880; cast in 1922; Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917); cast by A. A. Hébrard in Paris, France; Bronze, partially tinted, with cotton skirt and satin hair-ribbon; wood base; (without base) 39 in. (99.1 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.370)