Degas Paints A Portrait

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“I advise you to buy one of the finest Degas,” wrote Mary Cassatt to her friend Louise Havemeyer on one of the many occasions when the artist’s perspicacious suggestions added yet another masterpiece to the ever-growing Havemeyer collection. “It is much in the style of a Vermeer,” Miss Cassatt continued, “and quite as interesting, very quiet and reposeful. It is a beautiful picture. A woman in black seated upon a sofa against the light, the model was a sister of Berthe Morisot, not handsome, but a Degas!” The painting in question was the exquisite portrait of Mme Gobillard-Morisot (Frontispiece); Miss Cassatt’s advice was taken, and it was one of the 110 works by Degas that came to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1929 in the bequest of Mrs. Havemeyer.

Mme Gobillard before her marriage was Yves Morisot, the eldest of the three beautiful and talented daughters of M. and Mme Tiburce Morisot. All three studied painting, for which they showed unusual aptitude, but only the youngest, Berthe, devoted her life to it and won her way to a secure place in the history of French art. The hospitable and cultivated Morisot family numbered among their friends some of the most gifted artists of their time, including the highly individual and independent Edgar Degas. So, when Degas abruptly fell in love with Yves’s looks and proposed to paint her portrait, he was readily granted time for the sittings.

In the spring of 1869 Yves, who had been married two years earlier, was on an extended visit to her parents in Paris. Edma, also married, was living in Lorient, and by the greatest good luck Berthe left home before the sittings were completed. For it is in the letters that flew back and forth among the sisters and their mother that a brief but illuminating ray of light is shed on Degas and his methods of work and on the genesis and progress of this portrait.

We first hear about the project from Berthe, who wrote to Edma from Paris on May 11, “Yves has certainly made a conquest of M. Degas; he asked her permission to paint a portrait of her. He always speaks to me of you, asks for news of you and is indignant at the thought that I keep you informed of his latest infatuations.” By May 23 the artist had begun sketching. “Do you know,” wrote Mme Morisot to Edma, “that M. Degas is mad about Yves’s face and that he is making a sketch of her, a curious way to paint a portrait; he is going to transfer to canvas what he draws here in his sketchbook.” But Berthe remained cool to the artist and his work and reported to Edma, “As for your friend Degas, I certainly do not find his personality attractive; he has wit and nothing more. . . . M. Degas has made a sketch of Yves that I find mediocre; he chattered all the time he was doing it . . . ” Edma did not share this indifference. A short time earlier she had confided to Berthe, “It is disheartening that one cannot depend on artists. My infatuation for Manet is over; as for M. Degas, that is a different matter. For one

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ON THE COVER: Bronze Corinthian helmet of the late VII to the early VI century B.C. and a barbute with marks of the Milanese armorer Jacobo da Canobbio detto Bichignola and of Venice, dating from about 1470. Rogers Fund, 19.192.35; Gift of Mrs. George A. Douglass in memory of her husband, 60.151
thing, I am curious to know what he could have to say about me, and what he finds strange about me. ... You may call me foolish if you like, but when I think of any of these artists, I tell myself that a quarter hour of their conversation is worth as much as many stern qualities.” Now in response to Berthe’s letter of May 11 Edma wrote, “Your life must be charming at this moment ... to talk with M. Degas while watching him draw, to laugh with Manet, to philosophize with Puvis—each of these experiences seems to me enviable. You would feel the same way if you were so far away. . . .”

Then Berthe left Paris on her way to join Edma in Lorient, and we hear again of the sittings in an amused description sent to her by her mother on June 24: “Yves asked me to tell you that she will write you from Limoges. M. Degas took up her last moments here. That eccentric came on Tuesday; this time he took a big sheet of paper and set to work on the head in pastel. He seemed to be doing a very pretty thing and drew marvelously. He asked for an hour or two yesterday; he came to lunch and stayed the whole day. He seemed satisfied with what he had done and was annoyed at having to tear himself away from it. He really works with ease, for all this took place amidst the visits and the farewells that never ceased during these two days.” In Yves’s promised letter from Limoges, she wrote on June 26, “As mother must have explained to you, dear Berthe, M. Degas so absorbed all my time during the last days of my stay in Paris that my correspondence has been set aside. . . . The drawing that M. Degas made of me in the last two days is really very pretty, at once candid and delicate; he had trouble tearing himself away from his work. I somewhat doubt if he can transfer it to canvas without spoiling it.”

Although Degas did not literally transfer to canvas either of the pencil sketches or the pastel he used them freely to create a new portrait in oil that is a masterpiece of subtlety and grace. It is painted so thinly that it bears the quality of a drawing, but a drawing enhanced by a harmony of subdued color, tones of brown on brown—for even the gown is a dark, dark brown rather than a black—with a splash of sharp spring green seen through a doorway. As in the pastel the sitter’s head, with its finely drawn

features, pale cheeks, green eyes, and light brown curls, is seen in profile. The dark gown with its graceful spread of flounced skirt gives weight to the figure and substance to the composition. This arrangement of figure and background had already been worked out by Degas in the drawing that shows the sitter full-face and that is, in all probability, the earlier of the two (Figure 2). Its priority is indicated by the tentative character of the drawing itself; by the pose of the head, which was not repeated; and by the presence of the faint beginning of another head to the left, which suggests that the artist’s first intention may have been not to center the figure in the composition. In spite of these indications that Degas was feeling his way, it is remarkable how his eye grasped and his hand recorded here the whole picture much as he would eventually paint it. In the other pencil sketch (Figure 3) the figure alone is shown, in a similar but more relaxed pose. Here the sitter’s head turns to the right, the arms and hands are more carefully drawn, the details of the gown are more fully indicated, and the arrangement of the skirt is slightly revised. This drawing must have satisfied the artist, for it has been squared off for transfer and surely served as the basis of the painted figure, which follows it closely. In the painting the union of the two drawings and the importance of the change in the pose of the head can be fully appreciated. This change not only supplies a gentle contraposto movement to the composition but also, by turning the sitter away from the spectator and enclosing her within her surroundings, gives her a withdrawn, contemplative air and thus creates the quiet and repose that Mary Cassatt admired.

The pastel (Figure 1), according to Mme Morisot, was drawn in the last two hectic days of Yves’s visit. Its coloring set the tones for the painting: it too is a harmony of browns with a bright streak of green to enliven the background. But this pastel is a work of art too important in itself to be considered as a preliminary sketch for the painting, closely as the two are related. Degas was a careful and painstaking craftsman in spite of his seeming spontaneity. One can sense in the two drawings his workmanlike attitude and his purpose, as clearly stated in the Morisot letters, to use them as preparation for a painting—a painting that, as it turns out, is more picture than portrait. But Degas was fascinated by a particular face, the face of Yves Gobillard, and in the pastel he realizes to the full the delicacy and the unique beauty that captivated him. It is a miracle of flawless drawing and brilliantly handled chalks, of poetry and reality. When Berthe Morisot, describing the Salon of 1870 to Edma, remarked, “M. Degas sent a very pretty painting [this was the portrait of Mme Camus, now in the Chester Dale collection at the National Gallery in Washington] but his masterpiece is the portrait of Yves in pastel,” she was expressing a judgment with which one must surely agree.

Whether Berthe Morisot ever saw the oil painting of Yves we do not know. Nor do we know when Degas painted it. The well-documented drawings and the pastel of the spring of 1869 point to that year as its probable date. Although Degas was quite capable of picking up a project at a later time and elaborating on an earlier theme, there is little reason to believe that he did so in this instance. Both Mme Morisot and Yves reported that the artist intended a painted portrait to follow the sketches, the style of the painting is compatible with his work at that time, and the painting itself carries the conviction of spontaneity and sympathy. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that its composition followed close upon Degas’s first inspiration.

NOTES
The quotation from Mary Cassatt’s letter has been taken from the personal memoirs of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer; those from the Morisot letters have been translated from Denis Rouart Correspondence de Berthe Morisot (Paris, 1950) with the kind permission of the author. The two pencil sketches and the pastel are reproduced through the courtesy of their owner, Mme Paul Valéry, a daughter of Mme Gobillard-Morisot.