

# ART Facts™

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## Edgar Degas

1834 - 1917



Edgar Degas (ed-gahr day-gah) was the first son born to a wealthy banking family in Paris, France. His parents named him Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas. He had a standard upper class education and was known as a good student who excelled in drawing. His father had a love of art and often took his son to visit art galleries. Edgar's mother died when he was 13. His father never remarried.

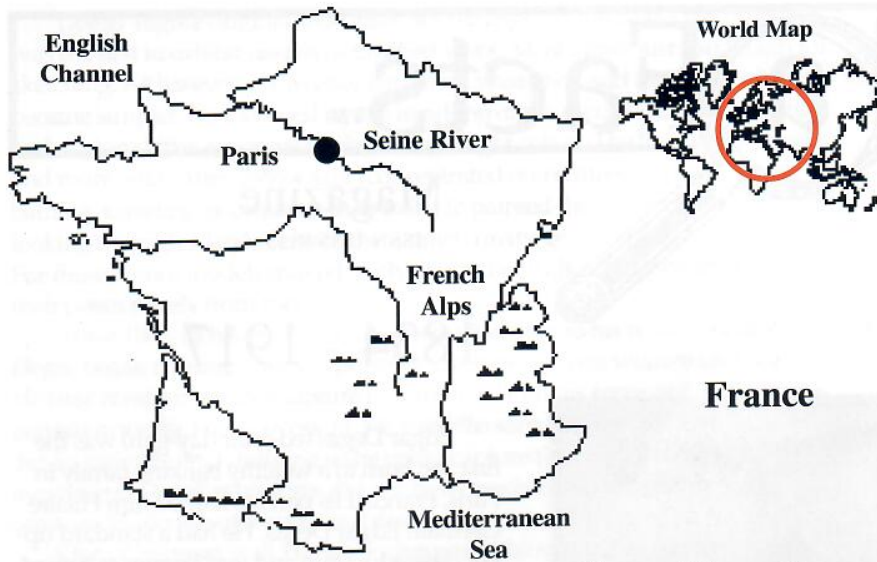
At age 19 Degas took up the study of law, but soon decided it wasn't for him. He wanted to be an artist. His father was skeptical about this decision. But, after Degas set up a studio at home to create his art, his father could see he was serious and allowed his son to enroll in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to study art. He soon dropped out because he liked neither the competitive atmosphere nor the jealousy and gossip among the students. Instead, he began to study privately with a local artist who only took a few students at a time. He spent many hours at the Louvre Museum with this artist, copying the works of Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Shortly thereafter, he began training with Jean Auguste-Dominique Ingres (AWN gruh), a French Neoclassical painter. Neoclassical painters of the early 1800s created paintings which used the Classical forms of Greece and Rome to express their ideas about courage, sacrifice and love of country. This kind of work was painted with brushlines one could barely see and few bright colors, which

Degas, Edgar. (1834-1917). *The Dance Class*, c. 1873-1876. Oil on canvas, 85 x 75 cm. Location: Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France. © Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY.

### Where In Time ?

1830s-1840s 1834 Degas is born.	1850s-1860s 1860 Snapshot photography 1861-1865 U.S. Civil War 1863 Salon des Refuses launches modern art. 1864 <i>War and Peace</i> written 1869 Suez Canal built	1870s 1871 Prussians besiege Paris 1874 Impressionist artists hold first show. 1876 Bell develops telephone. 1879 Edison develops lightbulb.	1880s-1890s Art Nouveau 1880 - 1910 Post Impressionism 1886 - 1920 1889 Eiffel Tower built in Paris.	1900s 1901 Ragtime Jazz Fauvism 1905 -1907 Cubism 1907 -1920 1917 Degas dies.
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usually produced calm and orderly feelings.

Degas learned about the Neoclassical and Romantic painting styles of the time and he liked both. Ingres taught him much about portraiture and he seemed destined to become a painter of historical subjects in the French tradition. But he abandoned this idea after travelling to Italy in 1856 and studying the 15th-16th century artists and viewing the churches, museums and palaces. Degas stayed at his grandfather's villa in Italy for three years, where he painted portraits of his father's family and friends, along with historical pictures.

Upon returning to Paris, Degas soon discovered this lively city of the 1860s to be a fascinating subject. It had not occurred to him or any artist of the time that a city was something to paint. He painted scenes from its dance halls, race courses, cafes, concert halls, theaters and the opera. The figures in his paintings were the participants and spectators at the events. He painted people

involved in their daily work and was simply fascinated by people busy at their profession. He practiced painting the figures in **movement** and also at solitary rest. Degas painted only people with whom he had emotional ties, such as family or friends. Through this he developed a deep sense of the human character.

Around 1866, Degas painted his first ballet picture. Ballet would be a source for many more paintings the rest of his life. He didn't just paint the glamour of the dancers on stage. He attended backstage dance classes and rehearsals to see the dancers up close. He drew the ballerinas over and over as they repeated their steps again and again. Degas' specialty was the human figure in motion and he created hundreds of paintings, drawings and pastels of ballerinas. He portrayed them off guard, in casual moments of scratching, stretching, yawning, adjusting slippers, or rubbing tired feet. He wanted to convey an "unposed", split-second snapshot feeling, like a candid photograph.

The ballet scenes he painted look casual but were carefully staged to present the viewer with viewpoints other than what an audience would see. In *The Dance Class*, the scene is viewed from the side. An **asymmetrical** arrangement squeezes the figures to the left and then balances the composition with empty, or negative space on the right. The dancers on the far right are cropped, giving the feeling that some are leaving the scene. He painted dramatic spotlighting in some pictures to emphasize the three dimensional quality of the scene.

Degas spent most of his time working in his studio but when he needed a change of scenery he visited a school friend who lived near a race course outside of Paris. Soon, horse racing became one of his favorite activities. He did not care who won the races. What interested him was the time between the races when he could draw informal sketches. But these paintings were more about the social scene at the race course than the movement of horses. Degas did numerous paintings of horse racing but thought it was interrupting his work, so for several years he concentrated on portraits of ballet dancers, laundresses and milliners in millinery shops. Around 1880, he took up the subject of horse racing again.

Eadweard Mybridge, a California photographer, provided insight into how a horse moves when he recorded on film the step-by-step sequence of a horse walking, trotting, cantering and galloping. Artists of the time knew little about how horses really moved so this exposed all the mistakes they had been making when drawing horses. Degas studied the movement of horses very closely and began to use them in his paintings as subjects for showing movement. Racing pictures towards the end of his life became more abstract because his eyesight began to fail and he painted motion from imagination and memory.

The Paris Salon Exhibition was the big annual art show in Paris. It was named for the room, or salon in the Louvre Museum where it was originally held.



Degas, Edgar. (1834-1917). *Jockeys*, 1886-90. Oil on paper, 26 x 36. Private Collection. Photo credit : Visual Arts Library



Degas, Edgar. (1834 -1917). *The Dancers*, about 1899, pastel on paper, 24 1/2 x 25 1/2 in. (62.2x64.8cm), Toledo Museum of Art, Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey.

attempt to sell it. He once convinced a buyer to give back a painting so he could improve it, but then Degas never returned it to the buyer.

His interest in drawing set him apart from other Impressionist artists. This interest came from admiration for Ingres, who had advised him to draw from memory and nature to become a good painter. The drawings and paintings he developed show that he was more concerned with the line, form and movement of the human body than Impressionist ideas.

Degas was full of contradictions. He was a leader among the Impressionists but shared very few of their ideas. When they moved outdoors from their studios, Degas stayed indoors because he detested painting outside and had no interest in landscape painting. He did not share their concern for the effects of changing light and atmosphere. Despite these basic differences, they considered him a charter member of the Impressionist movement because of friendship, a shared commitment to contemporary subject matter and opposition to the official academy paintings.

Except for his art he was conservative about everything else in his life. He was upper middle class and held old fashioned ideas on politics, women and society. He depicted lovely ballerinas and hard working women with sympathy and understanding, yet he frequently made unkind remarks about them. One minute he was brusque and rude, the next charming and generous. He preferred solitude, yet socialized most every evening with artist friends Claude Monet, Eduoard Manet and Auguste Renoir. He yearned for close female family members and friends. His circle of friends included female artists Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. He never married and fathered no children. Looking back at his life he said, "I was in love with art."

Degas played an important role in the development of American artist Mary Cassatt. She greatly admired his work and her paintings attracted his attention. They became good friends and he introduced her to the Impressionists. They liked her work and invited to exhibit with them. Cassatt and Degas, as well as other artists, were influenced by the Japanese wood block color prints that were imported into France during the 1860s. They tried to imitate the flat, brightly colored, sharply outlined images with contrasting linear patterns. Cassatt and Degas tried

out new materials and methods in order to make their prints as bright and colorful as possible.

In 1872 Degas needed a rest and traveled to New Orleans, Louisiana, home of his mother's family. He liked it there and did portraits of the family business. One picture is titled *Portraits in a New Orleans Cotton Office*. He soon became homesick and missed the opera and the ballet, so he returned to Paris.

When his eyesight began to fail in the 1870s, he switched from painting with oils to drawing with pastels, sticks of ground pigment held together by a binder. They can also be blended and layered like paint. This allowed him to draw and paint at the same time. Also, he didn't have to wait for pastels to dry.

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Describe what YOU see in Edgar Degas' painting *The Dance Class*. What mood do the people in the scene convey? How can YOU tell? How did Degas make this scene look more like a photograph than a painting?

Compare and contrast any similarities or differences about the subject, media used, composition, mood and design elements between Degas' two works, *The Dance Class* and *The Dancers*.

Why were ballerinas and horses the subjects for most of Degas' art? Why are there very few details on Degas' sculptures?

Degas' highly original style gave new strength to the pastel medium. He was the first to exhibit pastels as finished work. Most artists just used them for sketching. As his eyes got weaker his colors intensified and his compositions became simpler. He loosened up his handling of the medium in his later years and explored free, vigorous strokes using bright colors. The lines grew heavier and more bold. After 1886, Degas concentrated on pictures of nude women bathing, toweling or combing their hair. He painted these as if the viewer were looking through a keyhole with the women unaware of the viewer's presence. For these scenes models moved freely about the studio, then he reproduced their poses purely from memory.

After 1880, as his interest in figures carried over to his work in sculpture, Degas began creating wax sculptures of dancers, bathing women and horses. He may have turned to sculpture to learn to rely on his sense of touch as compensation for his failing eyesight. He used the same subjects for sculpting as he did for painting and drawing so he could capture the same illusion of swift movement. Degas' sculptures did not have much detail because he said one can't see the details of a horse as it dashes by.

One of his most well known sculptures is the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. One critic him asked why he portrayed the dancer as ugly. Degas responded that he wanted to show dancers as they really were and often used ordinary looking women as models.

By 1907 Degas was totally blind, but his work had become well known and was selling for large amounts of money. He died in 1917, full of self doubt and with a sense of failure about his work. All the figures found in his studio, including *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, had been modeled in wax. None were cast in bronze until after his death. He left an invaluable collection of drawings, prints, pastels and oil paintings.



Degas, Edgar (1834-1917). *Horse high-stepping*, 1865-1881. Bronze statuette. Photo: Jean Schormans. Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France. Photo credit: Réunion des-Musées Nationaux

## BOOKS ABOUT DEGAS

Susan E. Myer. **Edgar Degas**. (First Impressions), Harry N. Abrahms Inc. NY. 1994.

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**Degas Drawings**. Dover Publications. Mineola, NY. 1974.

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Degas, Edgar. (1834-1917). *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, Bronze sculpture, 1880-1881. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. Photo credit : Tate Gallery, London



MUSEUMS



Where YOU can find Degas' art:

National Gallery of Art, D.C.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts

Chicago Art Institute

Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX

North Carolina Museum of Art

Denver Art Museum

Norton Simon Art Institute, Pasadena, CA

Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH

## DEGAS WEBSITES

[www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/degas/](http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/degas/)

[www.abcgallery.com/D/degas/degas.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/D/degas/degas.html)

[http://art.koti.com.pl/degas/degas\\_en.html](http://art.koti.com.pl/degas/degas_en.html)

[www.biography.com/impressionists/artists\\_degas.html](http://www.biography.com/impressionists/artists_degas.html)

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[www.metmuseum.org/explore/Degas/html/index.html](http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/Degas/html/index.html)

[www.mcs.csu Hayward.edu/~malek/illusions/2cross-view/Impression/Degas/Degas1cv.html](http://www.mcs.csu Hayward.edu/~malek/illusions/2cross-view/Impression/Degas/Degas1cv.html)

