

Edgar Degas Notes

Vocabulary

Depth, Movement, Overlapping, Asymmetrical, Cropped, **Perspective**, **Negative**, Critique, Pastel, Impressionist, Symmetrical, Sculpture, Composition.

Degas, who believed that "the artist must live alone, and his private life must remain unknown", lived an outwardly uneventful life. In company he was known for his wit, which could often be cruel. He was characterized as an "old curmudgeon" by the novelist George Moore. Profoundly conservative in his political opinions, he opposed all social reforms and found little to admire in such technological advances as the telephone. He fired a model upon learning she was Protestant. Although Degas painted a number of Jewish subjects from 1865 to 1870, his anti-Semitism became apparent by the mid-1870s. His 1879 painting *At The Bourse* is widely regarded as strongly anti-Semitic, with the facial features of the banker taken directly from the anti-Semitic cartoons rampant in Paris at the time. The Dreyfus Affair, which divided Paris from the 1890s to the early 1900s, further intensified his anti-Semitism. By the mid-1890s, he had broken off relations with all of his Jewish friends, publicly disavowed his previous friendships with Jewish artists, and refused to use models who he believed might be Jewish. He remained an outspoken anti-Semite and member of the anti-Semitic "Anti-Dreyfusards" until his death.

The meticulous naturalism of his youth gave way to an increasing abstraction of form. Ironically, it is these paintings, created late in his life, and after the heyday of the Impressionist movement, that most obviously use the coloristic techniques of Impressionism.

He always painted indoors, preferring to work in his studio, either from memory, photographs, or live models. The figure remained his primary subject; his few landscapes were produced from memory or imagination. It was not unusual for him to repeat a subject many times, varying the composition or treatment. Degas himself explained, "In art, nothing should look like chance, not even movement."

Degas's only showing of sculpture during his life took place in 1881 when he exhibited *The Little Fourteen Year Old Dancer*. Degas assigned the same significance to sculpture as to drawing: "Drawing is a way of thinking, modeling another."

During his life, public reception of Degas's work ranged from admiration to contempt. As a promising artist in the conventional mode, Degas had a number of paintings accepted in the Salon between 1865 and 1870.

Degas' originality consisted in disregarding the smooth, full surfaces and contours of classical sculpture ... [and] in garnishing his little statue with real hair and clothing made to scale like the accoutrements for a doll. These relatively "real" additions heightened the illusion, but they also posed searching questions, such as what can be referred to as "real" when art is concerned.

Although Degas had no formal pupils, he greatly influenced several important painters, most notably Jean-Louis Forain, Mary Cassatt, and Walter Sickert; his greatest admirer may have been Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.