

# Edgar Degas

1834 – 1917

83

(deh-GAH) French Painter

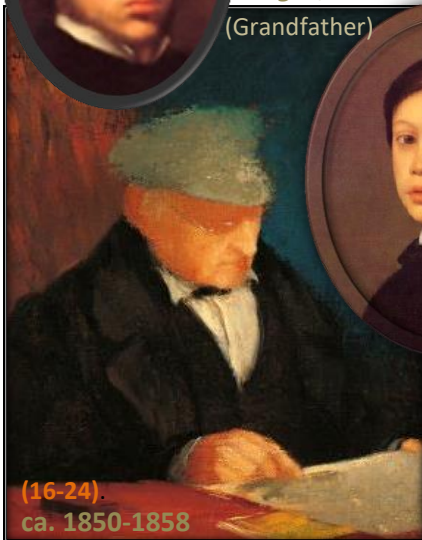


Ren  
Degas,

(Grandfather)

**Edgar Degas**, was born in Paris into a moderately wealthy family who encouraged his art career, so that he didn't need to earn a living initially. He was the eldest of five children of Célestine, a Creole from New Orleans, and Augustin De Gas, a banker. Degas (he adopted a less grandiose spelling when he became an adult) began schooling at **eleven**. His mother died when he was **13**, and his father and grandfather became his main influences.

By the time he graduated with a literature degree (**18**), he had turned a room in his home into an artist's studio. He registered as a copyist in the Louvre, but his father expected law school. Degas enrolled at the Faculty of Law, University of Paris, but applied little effort. He subsequently attended an art school.



(16-24).  
ca. 1850-1858



Portrait of  
Rene De Gas,  
1855  
(21)

The Chair, 1860 (26)



Melancholy, late 1860's

In 1856 (**22**), Degas visited Italy for three years. He copied works by **Michelangelo**, **Raphael**, and other Renaissance artists, but—contrary to convention—he usually selected a detail that had caught his attention—a secondary figure, or a head—to treat as a portrait. He returned to Paris in 1859 (**25**).

During rifle training for the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 (**36**), (defended Paris), his eyesight was found to be defective, and for the rest of his life it was a constant worry. Failing eyesight eventually caused him to switch from oil painting to the easier mediums of pastels and charcoal. In 1912 (**78**), he quit doing art because of blindness.



*Self Portrait* and enlargement, 1855 (**21**). Photo, 1950s.

*Portrait of the Bellelli Family* (his aunt, her husband, and their children), 1858–67 (**24-33**).

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*A Cotton office in New Orleans, 1873 (21).*

After the war, in 1872 (38), Degas visited New Orleans, where his brother René and other relatives lived. Degas produced a number of works, many depicting family members.

*A Cotton Office in New Orleans*, garnered favorable attention in France, and was his only work purchased by a museum during his lifetime. Degas' sale of this piece marked a turning point as he moved from struggling to a recognized and financially stable artist.

The picture depicts the moment when his uncle Michel Musson's cotton brokerage business went bankrupt in an economic crash. In the painting, Musson is seen examining raw cotton while Degas' brother René

reads *The Daily Picayune*. It carried the bankruptcy news. Another brother, Achille, rests against a window wall at left while others, including Musson's partners, go about their business.



(42-53)

*Jockeys near a Carriage, 1876-87*

Degas returned to Paris in 1873 (39), and his father died the next year. Degas then learned that René had amassed enormous business debts. To preserve his family's reputation, Degas sold his house and an inherited art collection to pay the debts. Dependent for the first time on artwork sales for income, he produced much of his greatest work during 1874 - 84 (40-50).

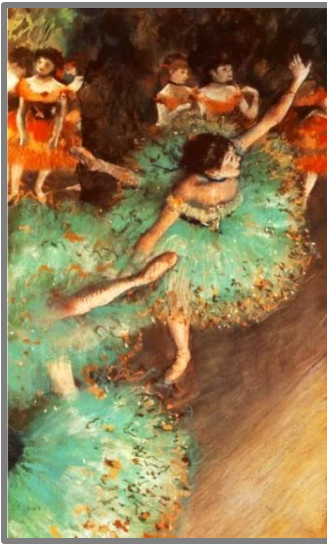
Early on, Degas wanted to be a history painter, but changed (early thirties) to classically painting modern life. He was masterful in depicting movement, and catching "snapshots" of life, Which he preferred to portraits. Dancers and horse racing were favorite subjects.



*The Dancing Class, 1871 (37).*

*A Woman seated beside a Vase of Flowers, 1865 (31).*





Degas is regarded as a founder of Impressionism although he deeply disliked the title, preferring to be called a “realist.”

Degas explained, “No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and of the study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing.”



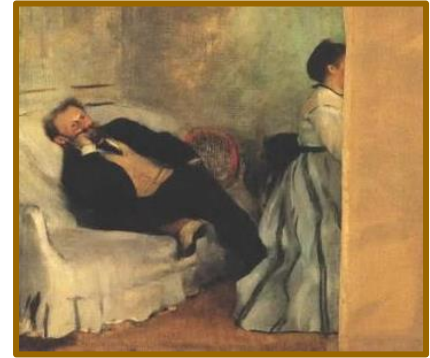
Always painting indoors, from memory, photographs, or live models, he was a deliberative artist. Degas: “In art,

nothing should look like chance, not even movement.” Yet, his Parisian life scenes, off-center compositions, experiments with color and form, and friendships with Impressionist artists—most notably Mary Cassatt and Édouard Manet—all relate him to Impressionism.

He took a leading role in organizing the Impressionist Exhibitions, showing his work in all but one of them, despite his persistent conflicts with others in the group. He had little in common with Monet and other landscape painters, whom he mocked for painting outdoors. He abhorred the scandal created by the exhibitions and the publicity and advertising his colleagues sought. The rancor within the group contributed to its disbanding in 1886 (52).



*Degas in a green Jacket, 1855-1856 (21-22).*



*The Green Dancer, 1879 (45).*

*Portrait of Miss Cassatt, Seated, Holding Cards, 1876-78 (42-44).*

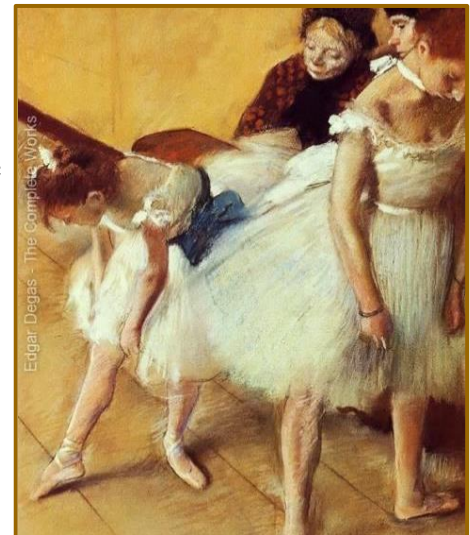
*Édouard Manet and Mme.*

*Manet, 1868-69 (34-35).*

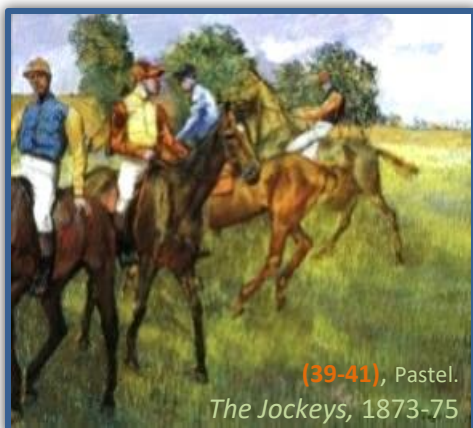
*At The Bourse (At the Stock Exchange), 1879 (45).*

*The Dance Examination, 1880 (46).*

Degas, who believed that “the artist must live alone, and his private life must remain unknown,” lived an outwardly uneventful life. He was known for his wit, which could often be cruel, and characterized as an “old curmudgeon.” 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 (31-36), his anti-Semitism became apparent by the mid-1870s. His 1879 (45) *At The Bourse* is widely regarded as strongly anti-Semitic, with the facial features of the banker taken from the anti-Semitic cartoons rampant in Paris at the time. In Europe there were fears of a financial conspiracy, in which Jewish financiers were thought to manipulate business for their gain. In fact, Degas's anti-Semitism may have been fueled by the bankruptcy of his own family's banking business, leaving Degas with some degree of resentment toward banking and those who symbolized it.

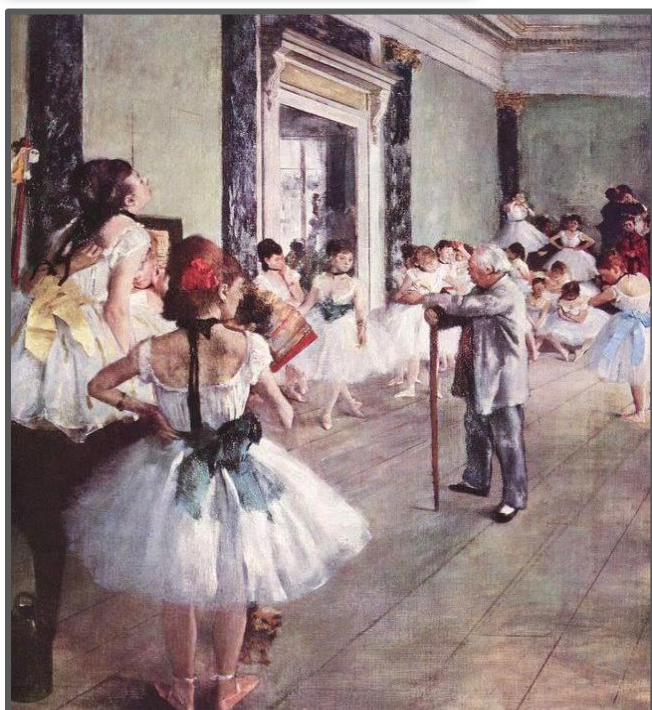






Degas took a passionate interest in the invention of the camera. He photographed friends, as in his double portrait of **Renoir** and **Mallarmé**. Photography's influence on his work is evident in off kilter angled looks he gave them and the lack of color in some of his pieces.

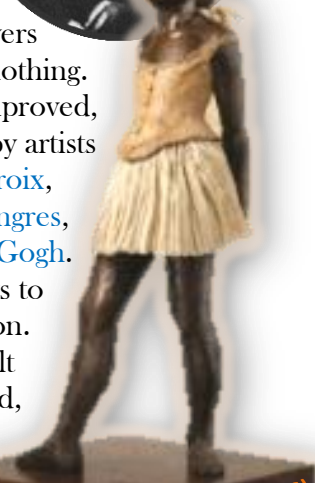
He created over 100 small sculptures. For models. *Ballet Girl in Bronze* was the only one publicly displayed during his life; the rest were discovered after he died. Viewers were shocked that it was "dressed" in real clothing.



As his financial situation improved, he was able to collect works by artists he admired: **Daumier**, **Delacroix**, **El Greco**, **Manet**, **Pissarro**, **Ingres**, **Cézanne**, **Gauguin**, and **Van Gogh**. After he died, it took two days to sell off the collection at auction.

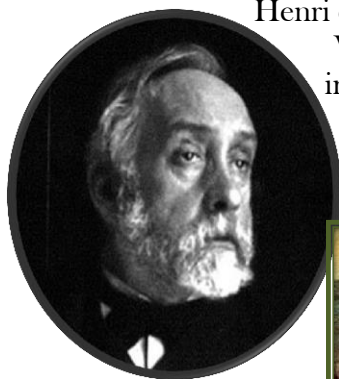
Degas was known as difficult and selfish. He never married, had no children and lived alone. He became isolated as he believed a painter could have no personal life. He'd rejected all his Jewish friends. His argumentative nature was deplored by **Renoir**, who said, "What a creature he was, that Degas! All his friends had to leave him; I was one of the last to go, but even I couldn't stay till the end."

*Ballet Girl in Bronze, 1880 (46). Bronze Casting, 39 inches.*



Although Degas had no formal pupils, he influenced several painters, including Mary **Cassatt**. His greatest admirer may have been Henri de **Toulouse-Lautrec**.

When his residence's impending demolition forced him to move in 1912 (78), he apparently ceased



working. His last years were spent wandering the streets of Paris, nearly blind, before he died in 1917 (83).



*Photograph of Renoir and Mallarmé. The Dance Class, 1873 – 76 (39-42). The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier, 1872 (38). Photograph of Degas, c. 1895 (61). Dancing Peasant Girls, c. 1895 (61).*