

Edgar Degas

(Ed-gar De-GAH)

French “Impressionist” [Realist] Painter
Impressionist Period of Art

B: 19 July, 1834, Paris France

D: 27 September 1917, Paris France



Named for both his grandfathers, Hilaire Germaine Edgar Degas was born in Paris in 1834. As the son of a French-Italian banker and an American mother from New Orleans, Degas had an unusual heritage for the time; his uncles included Giuseppe Morbilli, the Italian Duc di Saint Angelo, and Norbert Rillieux, the famous African-American Chemical Engineer.

Growing up, Edgar’s banker father provided an excellent classical education for Edgar and his brothers and sisters. After graduation, Edgar began to study law, but soon abandoned it for painting. His father’s financial support allowed the adult Edgar the freedom to paint anything without having to worry about supporting himself through his art. He visited his Italian relatives and studied the Renaissance artists, went to art school in Paris and later, visited his American family in New Orleans, painting portraits and scenes from their post-Civil War cotton export business.

Degas

After returning to France in 1874, his father died and Degas and his French siblings discovered their youngest brother, Rene, who ran the export business in New Orleans, had run up enormous business loans against his father’s bank before running away. The bank collapsed. To preserve the family’s name and reputation, Edgar and his siblings sold much of their inherited properties and paintings, and for the first time, Edgar Degas had to live by his brush. Sadly, by this time, he was also rapidly growing blind.

Nonetheless, he persisted. He experimented with new techniques and subject matter. Rejected by the French Art Salon, the jury for the top art show in Europe, Degas and many of his artist friends, including Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Paul Cezanne, made the radical and unheard-of decision to create their own art show in a studio for the public. Financially, the show was a bust, and most people mocked the artwork the group exhibited. One reviewer, Louis Leroy, savaged the whole thing and called it a mere “impression” of art. The name, “Impressionist,” stuck. Degas hated it. He preferred “realist.”

Due to his failing eyes, Degas, unlike most of his Impressionist friends, preferred to work indoors and worked with pastels as often as oils. His favorite subject were the beautiful ballet dancers of Paris. Over half of his known works are of these women and performers. He loved to paint them in their moments of movement, but because his eyes were so poor, he paid the performers to model these difficult stances for hours at a time. They even helped him select the colors he wanted as his eyesight dimmed to a point he could barely see.

After losing his sight completely, he turned to sculpture. He only ever exhibited one sculpture in his lifetime: “Little Dancer, 14 years old.” He died during WWI, just weeks after the US entered the conflict.

Vocabulary:

Movement



Napoleon Crossing the Alps, (original copy) 1801

In art, movement is suggested by the use of diagonal and curved lines.

We instinctively know that vertical and horizontal things are stable and secure (think of a house, or a piece of furniture...it's made of horizontal and vertical walls and boards, right?)

Diagonals and curves, especially in the human form, indicate energy and motion, because very few things can

remain motionless while holding a leaning or twirling position, and their clothes swirl energetically around them.



Emperor Napoleon in his Study at the Tuileries, 1812

Compare these paintings of Napoleon by Neo-Classical French artist Jacques-Louis David (Da-VEED) (1748 – 1825). Which one suggests a moment of action and which one a moment of stability and calm? Napoleon used different images for different reasons; one of these wants to depict Napoleon as an energetic military leader, the other as a calm, rational leader who has just re-written the laws of France for a new world. Which one is which? And how do you think straight or diagonal lines help?

Pastel

Pastels are an art **medium**, a material an artist uses to create art.

They are created with:

- pigments (the colored powder)
- a binder (something to stick the pigment together)
- and sometimes gypsum, clay, or chalk.



These ingredients are mixed together, then rolled into cylinders or packed into molds. Because they have such high amounts of pigments in them, they are extremely bright and bold. They can be blended on paper (using a finger, Q-tip, finely woven cloth, or facial tissue), or layered one over top of the other.

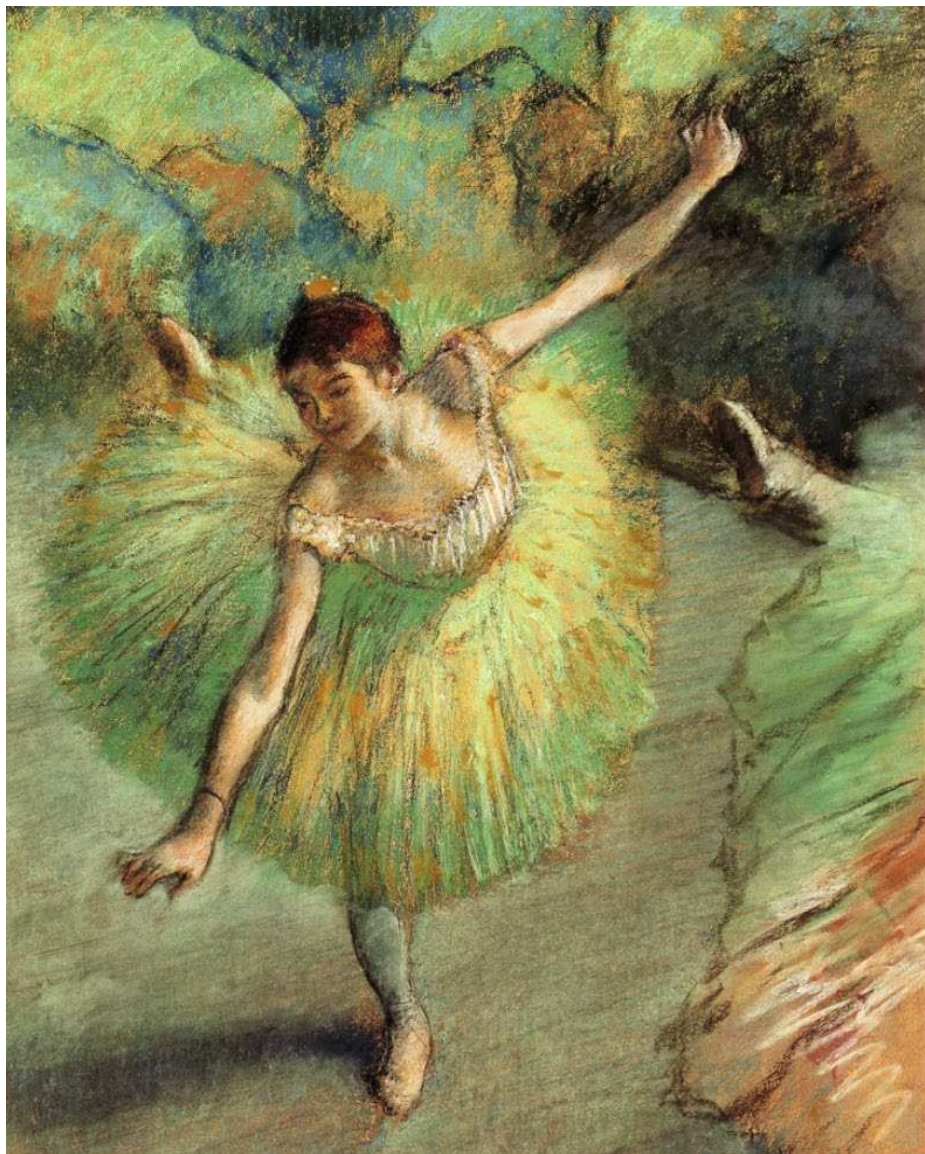
Pastels were popular during the height of the French Royal court but fell out of favor after the French Revolution. Degas and some Impressionists brought pastels back, but in a new, more sketchy fashion. As Degas lost his sight, he was better able to work with pastels than oil paints. However, as you look at his pastel work, notice how his colors become brighter and more vibrant (he could see those better) and his pastel marks become looser as he blended less.

Quotes by Degas:

“Art is not what you see but what you make others see.”

“No art is less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters.”

(This last part references the fact that many Impressionist painters were trying to capture a single, spontaneous moment in time. Degas, by contrast, would spend hours creating numerous sketches, trying to understand a point of movement before returning to his studio to plan out a painting or pastel work, and finally, if necessary, inviting a model to pose in the precise movement he needed. This was another reason why Degas didn't like being labeled an “Impressionist” artist.)



Tilting Dancer, 1883; Pastel on Paper; Private Collection

“La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans” (Little Dancer, Age 14)



1880-1881

*Bronze, Waxed Silk, bodice, tulle skirt, fabric ribbon,
One of at least 28 copies, this one is in the National
Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. USA*

This is the only sculpture Degas ever exhibited publicly: “Little Dancer, 14 years old.”

When it was exhibited in 1882, it divided critics. At the time, it was made of wax, and featured a human hair wig tied with a ribbon, a real silk and tulle tutu and satin slippers. Critics were divided: some said it was revolutionary approach to sculpture. Others were repulsed due to the “rules” the statue had “broken.” It was made of an unusual material and wearing real clothes. It depicted a contemporary, working-class person who was not famous. (Up until then, most sculptures were of historical/mythical personages, or famous contemporary people). The girl's thrust-up expression was mocked: she looked “ugly,” said one reviewer.

We don't know what the model thought of these insults, but we do know the little girl's name. She was Marie Van Goethem, one of three sisters who were “petits rats de l'opéra”

(literally, Opera Rats”).

Like many of these Opera Rats, Marie and her sisters were from a poor family, struggling to survive, and dancing in part to help earn money for their widowed mother. Degas paid Marie to hold this position for hours at a time, while he, semi-blindly, molded the wax around a skeleton he created out of metal rods and paintbrushes.

After the showing, Degas brought the Little Dancer back to his studio and home. After he passed away, his brother and his sister's children discovered her and dozens of other wax models in Degas's studio. They decided to allow some of these wax models to be made into bronze castings. Twenty-Eight little dancers were made, and true to the original model, each wears a tutu with a fabric skirt, and sometimes, a ribbon in her bronze hair. Because of this, each “Little Dancer” you see in a collection can look slightly different.

Incidentally, no one knows what became of Maria a year or so after she posed for this statue. She was fired from the Opera because she missed too many classes and vanished into history. Her little sister Charlotte, however, went on to become a ballet instructor at the Opera.

“Bowing Dancers” (1885)



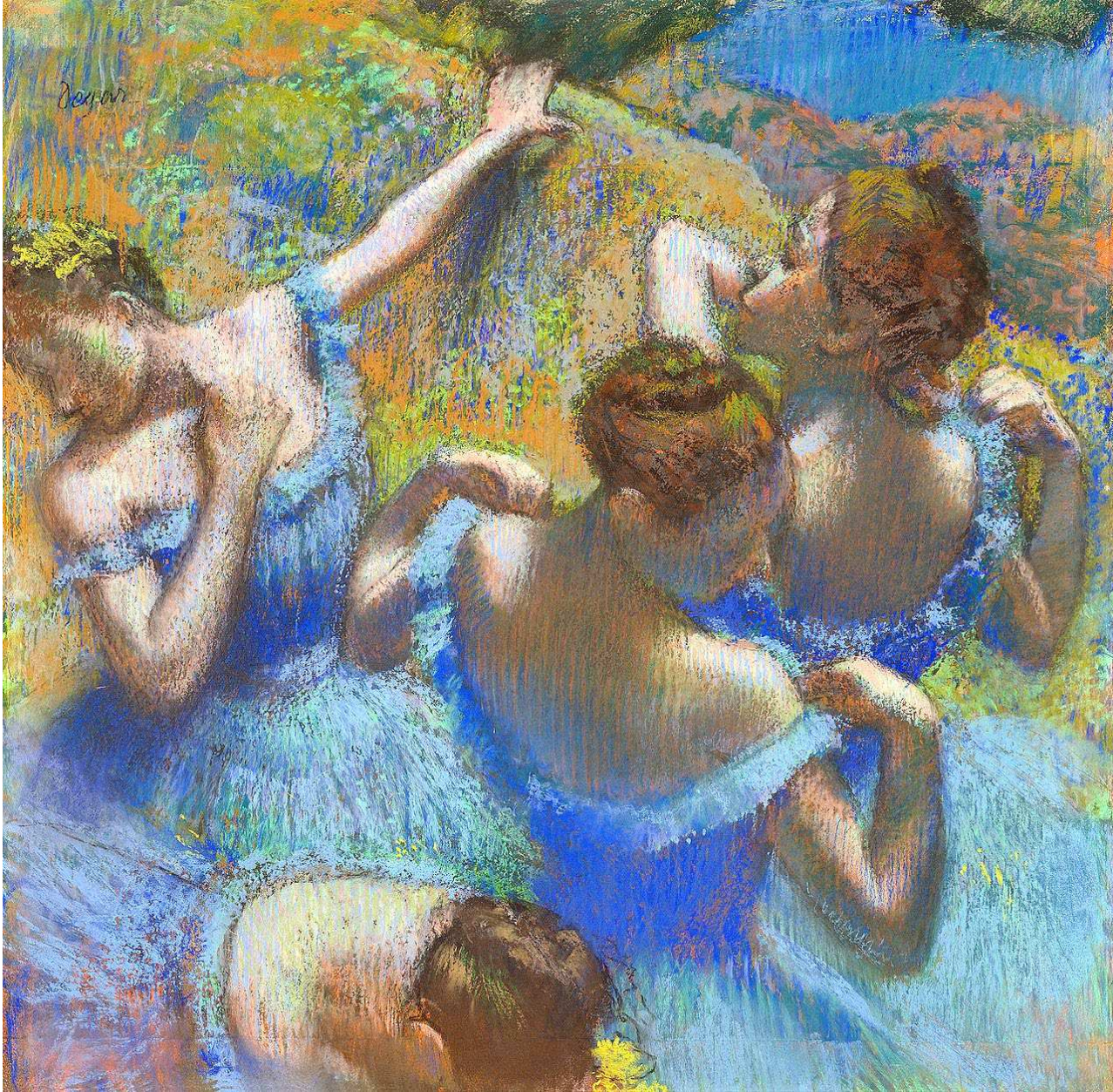
Pastel On Paper
36 cm x 49 cm (14.1 in x 19.2 in)
Private Collection (Image from Wikimedia Commons)

Here, Degas layers the pastel thickly on the skirts and decorations of the tutu bodice, while smoothly blending the pastels on the skin and tights of the bowing dancers. (See inset on the left of the right-hand dancer.)

Notice how the diagonal lines emphasize the moment the dancers reach out in a bow, while the next line of dancers behind them wait for their box with hands clasped.

Degas was known for his skill in capturing a moment of motion so smoothly and accurately, it looked natural, which is a very hard skill to master.

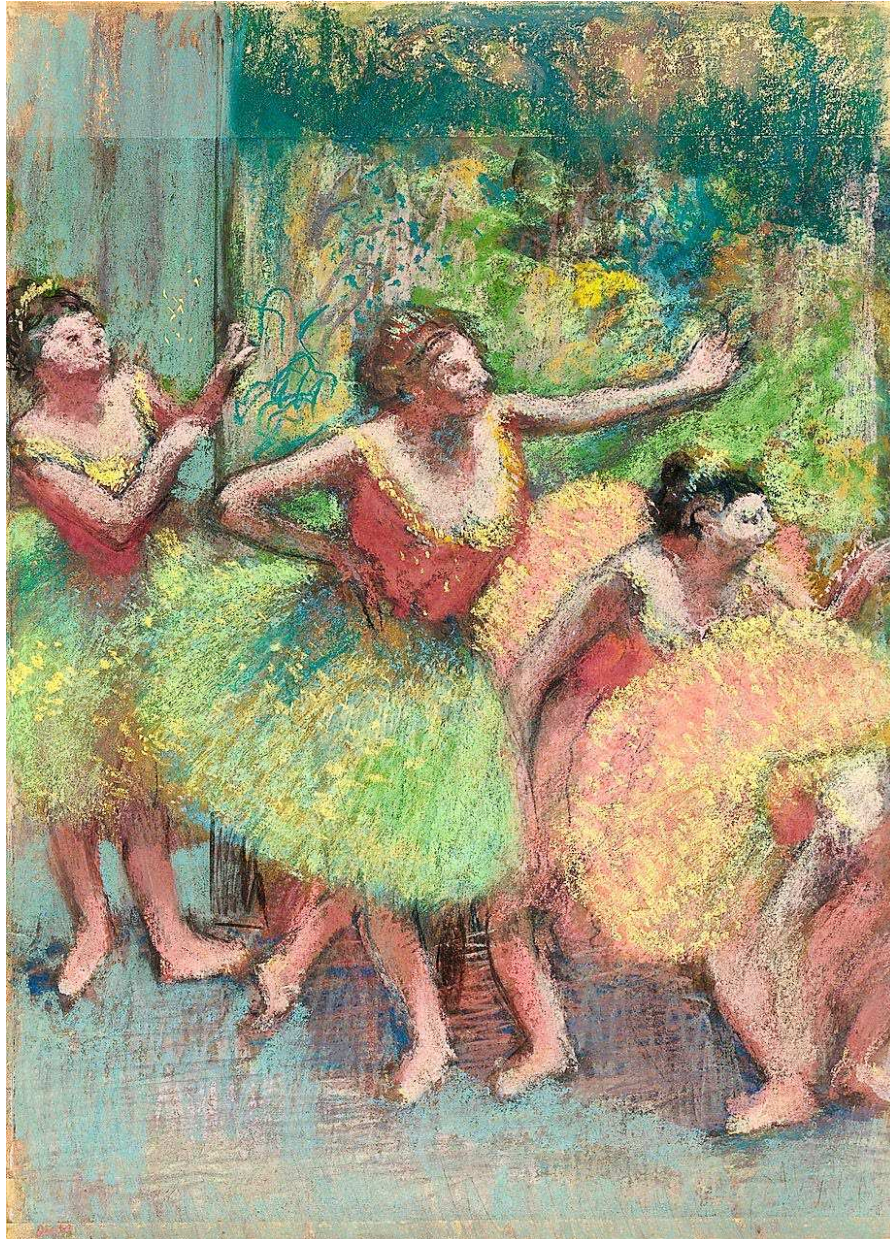
Blue Dancers, 1899



Pastel on Cardboard
65 cm x 65 cm (25.6 In x 25.6 in)
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia

By this time, Degas was mostly blind, and his pastels works are becoming quite vivid and bright with large, loose strokes with the pastel. While Degas was interested in the movement of the human body, notice he is not interested in the facial expressions like Rembrandt was; the faces of two of these ladies are blurred out, and a third is below the frame. His interest lies in how the human body bends and flexes even as these dancers do everyday things: adjusting their tutus and stretching in preparation for going on stage.

Danseuses Vertes et Jaunes (Dancers in Green and Yellow) (1903)



Pastel on Paper
98.8 cm x 71.5 cm (approx. 39 in x 28 in)
Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA

This one of Degas's late works. His eyesight deteriorated so much he had to quit art altogether between 1911 and 1912. Yet despite his difficulties with his eyes, Degas is still about to capture this movement of curious waiting by this group of dancers as they seem to wait their cue to enter the stage. Despite the roughness of the pastel marks, he has still captured the attitudes of these women in their body language.

Degas also acted as a mentor and teacher for a number of other artists. For a while, he and American printmaker Mary Cassatt worked together. Paul Gauguin and Degas also exchanged letters and art. Degas learned about Gauguin's use of color, Gauguin learned about how Degas used line to make expressive drawings.

Take Home;

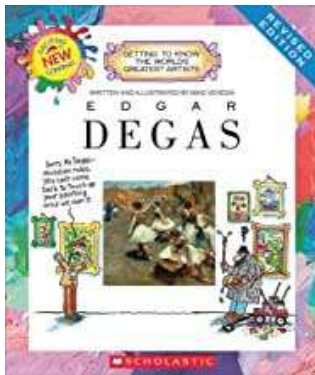
Videos:

YouTube: **Mati and Dada: Degas:**” A short, animated movie about how Degas worked with dancers. Great for even the youngest children. Check out many of their other videos too, as they explore many different artists from the Middle ages to the modern era.

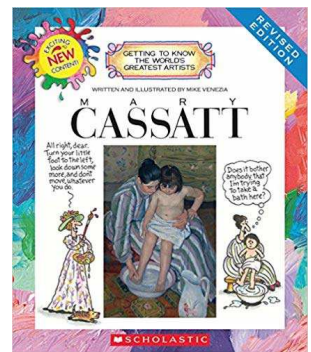
YouTube: **“Conserving Degas”** by channel “The Met.” A short (5 minute) mini-documentary about the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recent replacement of their copy of “The Little Dancer” and why they chose to change the skirt style.

You Tube: **“Edgar Degas: 6 Minute Art History Video”** by Indigo Artbox This wonderful little video goes in-depth into some of Degas work, his life, and the influences his art and techniques had on others. Some warning: around the 3:40 mark, two Neo-Classical paintings by famous artists are shown, which feature small nudes as part of the composition. Your child may even miss them, but if you are concerned, check out the video first.

Books:



Meet the World’s Greatest Artists: Edgar Degas by Mike Venezia. Another in Venezia’s wonderful series gives a child-friendly biography of Degas while also showing many of Degas best known works. I own this book’s older version and love the mix of humorous cartoon illustrations and real art. Better yet, my kids love this series too. Check out this series book about Mary Cassatt as well. She was a student of Degas, and their working partnership is featured in Cassatt’s book as well.



Degas and the Dancer by Laurence Anholt.

Lovely children’s book exploring the modeling for “The Little Dancer” ythrough the eyes of Marie, the model. We know very little about Marie, but the story is still charming, talking about what might have happened when Marie posed for Degas.

Warning:

Degas also painted many nudes of women bathing. Most are from the back, but not all. If you look for Degas online, you may find these, so if that is something that concerns you, be sure to pre-screen your paintings or try search terms like :

- Degas Ballet Dancers
- Degas horse and jockey paintings (this is another, less-well known genre of Degas’s work)
- Degas portraits.

This won’t guarantee that a nude won’t pop up, but it will greatly lessen the chances than simply searching “Degas works” or “:Degas Paintings.”

