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HYPERION MINIATURES

DE GAS

BY

HENRI DUMONT



SEYER PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST detail

D E G A S

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DEGAS

THE art of Degas partakes both of classicism and of impressionism, while its concern with the social aspect of city life sets it apart from the art of his contemporaries. One says "Monet and Renoir," "Sisley and Pissarro"—the name of Degas can be likened with no other.

Edgar Degas was born on July 19th, 1834; his full name was Hilaire Germain Edgard (spelt with a "d"). His father, M. Auguste de Gas, was a banker and not the least of the artist's cool detachment may be ascribed to his upbringing in an atmosphere of quiet affluence. Frequent sojourns in Italy where the family had relatives among the nobility (he later painted the portraits of his aunt, the Baroness Bellelli, and of the Duchess Morbilli

his sister) cultivated his taste at an early age. After a thorough classical education, Edgar Degas studied law, to satisfy the wish of his parents who, however, did not attempt to thwart his own ambition to paint. In 1855 he entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and for a time painted in the classical manner, inspired by historical scenes. He greatly admired Ingres and bid fair to become a neo-classical painter himself: however the whole trend of art and literature at that period drew him away from the conventional and, via portrait-painting, towards the real.

In literature, the Goncourts and Zola, in painting, Courbet and Manet had cast off tradition and were depicting modern life in its true aspects, undisguised by romanticism and historical reminiscence. The greater liberty of subject and treatment evidently appealed to Degas whom a certain lack of imagination would have prevented from achieving brilliance in classical themes.

However, he was by no means a revolutionary, either in his political ideas or in his views on art. He disliked the naturalist school, and distrusted those who did not share his conservative opinions. This did not prevent his patronising the Impressionists and helped to organize their first Exhibition in 1874.

His methods and aims differed profoundly from those of the rising young school. He considered color a subsidiary element which he, for his part, could very well dispense with, whilst the capture of living light on the canvas, the joy and torment of Claude Monet, did not interest him at all. Nor was his main object plane and volume as it was Cézanne's. His chief preoccupation lay with drawing—"arrested movement"—the *line* of a dancer, a woman taking a bath or dressing, a laundress carrying her load. Oil painting somewhat irked him and he preferred pastels which, especially when he drew dancers in the iridescence of the footlights, answered his purpose better. He also engraved and experimented with various processes of reproduction.

As a man-about-town with means and leisure, Degas spent much time behind stage at the opera and also at the races. He observed the dancers and their "petit-bourgeois" families, the horses and their riders, gentlemen and jockeys, and made little sketches on the spot, but he always worked in his studio and had no patience with the "open air" theories, so dear to Monet, Renoir and the other Impressionists. "Painting is not a sport," he used to say. He was a man of fads and unaccountable phobias; he disliked animals and flowers, admitted very few people into his home and drove life-long friends away by his caustic tongue and intolerant opinions. He was intensely



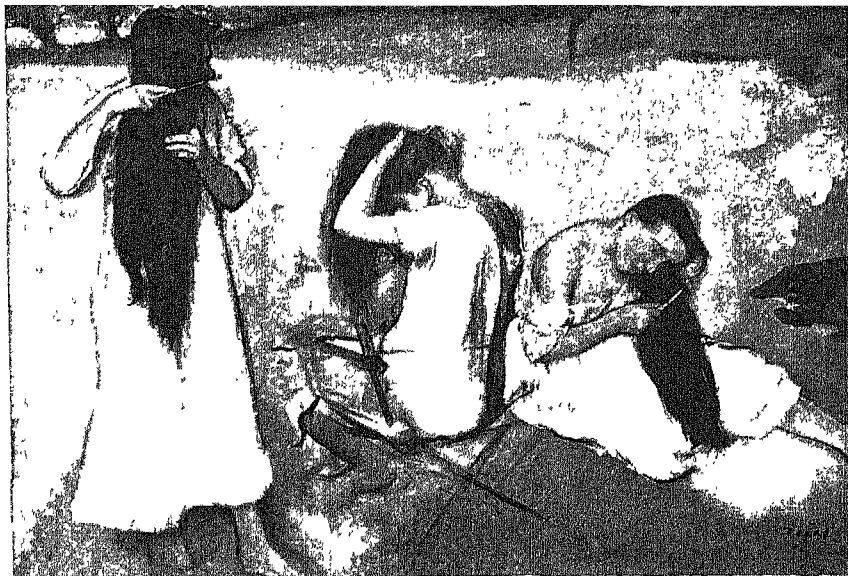
THE DANCING LESSON

Collection Mrs Esther Fiske Hammond, Santa Barbara

lonely, but never married, an unhappy love affair in early youth is said to be the cause of his attitude of fierce contempt for women in every walk of life.

It was this disappointment perhaps, as much as a deep sense of social superiority which made him stamp all his women with the imprint of their class. He does not hesitate to depict them in vulgar attitudes, yawning, stretching or scrubbing themselves. The faces of his "café-concert" singers are distorted almost to caricature. Even the little dancing girls are not always pure and airy grace; sometimes they slump down with fatigue in more or less awkward attitudes. Yet he was not bent on satire but on the simple expression of truth.

During the war of 1870, Degas was enrolled in an artillery unit which defended Paris. Except for his trips to Italy, a tour of Spain in 1889 and a journey to New Orleans in 1872, where Degas' brothers were established in the cotton trade, the painter never left his beloved capital for long. From



WOMEN COMBING THEIR HAIR Phillips Memorial Gallery

his visit to New Orleans he brought back a portrait of his blind sister-in-law and an almost photographic rendering of a cotton-office.

Degas' paintings excited neither hostility nor disapproval and were officially exhibited at the Salon year after year, until in 1870 he stopped sending them. From 1874 and for about ten years he exhibited with the Impressionists. He did not care about selling any of his pictures, indeed he hated parting with the least of his "articles" as he disparagingly called them. When he did eventually consent to sell one of them, it was only in order to increase his collection of paintings and engravings by Delacroix and Ingres, his gods. He also bought the works of the Impressionists, in spite of being personally at odds with some of them. His pet aversion was Cézanne, whose technique and passionate research were poles apart from his own, and he often exercised his cool, distinguished irony at the expense of the hot-tempered, crude plebeian. He quarrelled with Manet and with Renoir. Nevertheless he greatly admired the ease and grace of Renoir's painting.



TWO WOMEN The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Degas seldom painted landscapes otherwise than as a background for his racing scenes or portraits, his passion for movement, expression and the psychological interest of details finding no scope in the subject.

In spite of his aloofness, he was not exempt from a certain degree of vanity and towards the end of his life he liked it to be known that he was Degas, the famous painter.

His sight, never strong, finally failed him almost completely. Unable to paint, he took refuge in sculpture and although many of his best works, which he judged unworthy of imperishable bronze, were destroyed during his lifetime, seventy-three of them were salvaged and cast, thanks to the efforts of the sculptor Bartholomé. They are mostly busts, and figures of dancers and horses. While his eyes still served him, he also experimented in ceramic and it may be said that he left no means of expression unexplored.

Degas was fortunate in being able to preserve his independence entirely and to work for art's sake. He did not paint for a living; he could if he



WOMAN TAKING A BATH Private Collection

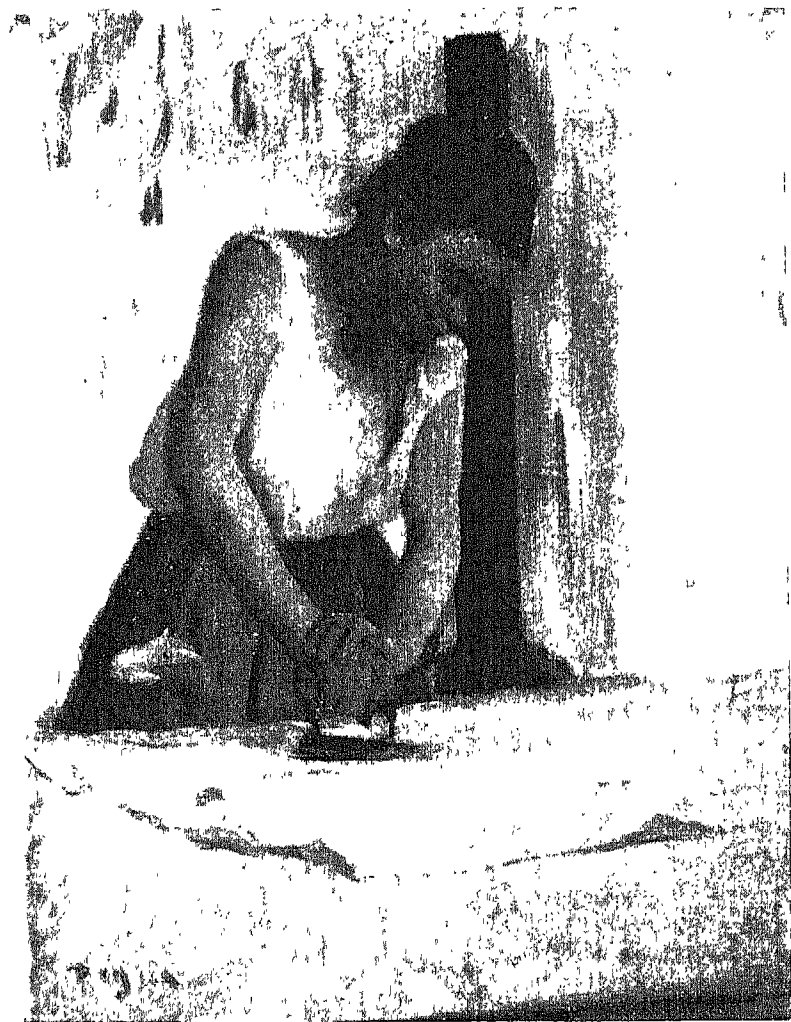
wished keep his works and improve upon them as long as he pleased. Sometimes he greatly annoyed amateurs by doing so endlessly when the picture was already out of his hands. He painted for the pure satisfaction of the spirit, indifferent to criticism and yet averse to creating any sort of sensation. His works—his prim portraits and elegant racing-scenes, his rainbow dancers and tired working-women together with his unflattering nudes—fully and impartially illustrate the life of Paris in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The war of 1914 found Degas listless in his great age and he seemed to realize but dimly what was going on. Almost quite deprived of sight he would wander about Paris day after day, sometimes on foot, sometimes boarding a chance street-car, constantly returning to the site of his former home in Montmartre where he had lived for twenty-five years and which he had been obliged to leave as it was to be pulled down. He died in 1917, almost unnoticed in the tumult of events.

HENRI DUMONT



STUDY OF DIEGO MARTELLI The Fogg Museum of Art
Paul J. Sachs Collection







DANCING GIRL THANKING HER AUDIENCE detail

Louvre Museum, Paris



DANCING GIRL THANKING HER AUDIENCE
Louvre Museum, Paris





MARY CASSATT AT THE LOUVRE
French Art Galleries, New York





AFTER THE BATH
Durand Ruel Galleries, New York



HALF LENGTH STUDY OF DANCING GIRLS detail

Toledo Museum of Art



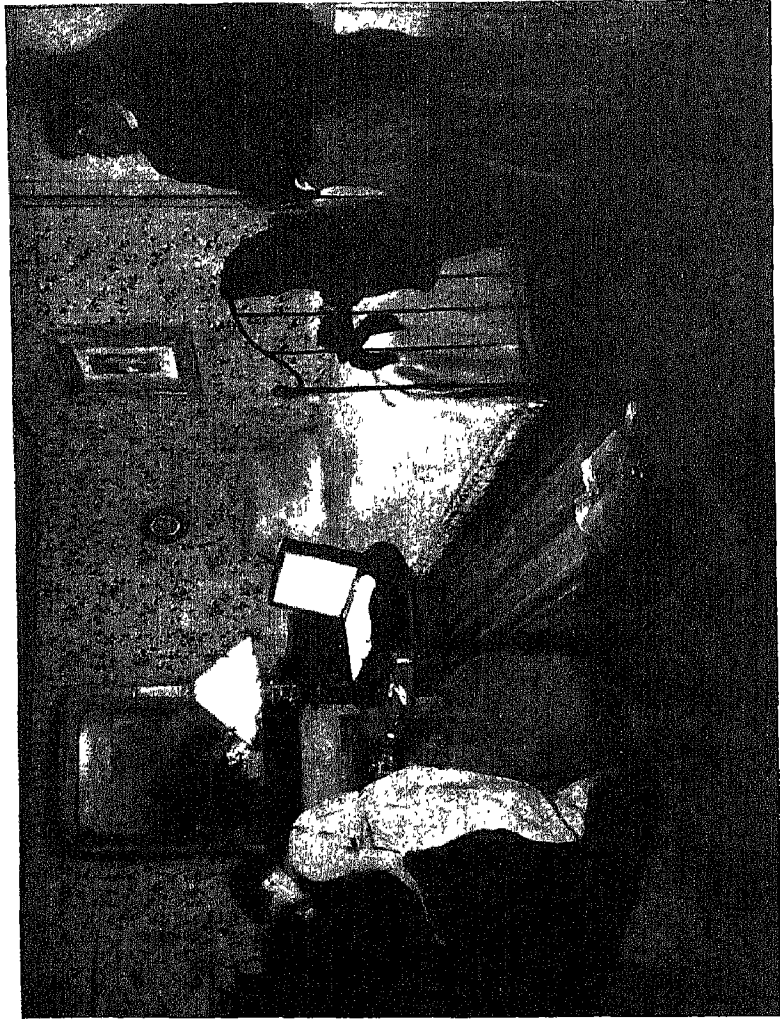
HALF-LENGTH STUDY OF DANCING GIRLS
Toledo Museum of Art



PORTRAIT OF JULIE BELLELLI
Private Collection



DANCERS AT THEIR TOILET
Denver Art Museum



THE INTERIOR, Collection Henry P. McIlhenny, Philadelphia



A CAFE ON MONTMARTRE, Louvre Museum, Paris



THE BALLET The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.







AFTER THE BATH detail
Courtesy Ambroise Vollard, Paris



[301] BALLET SCENE Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn,
New York





THE MILLINERY SHOP

[32] Art Institute of Chicago, Collection Mr and Mrs L. L. Coburn



TWO IRONERS Durand-Ruel, Paris





PORTRAIT OF DIEGO MARTELLI detail
Jacques Seligmann, Paris



DEGAS' FATHER LISTENING TO PAGANS
Collection John T Spaulding, Boston



THEATRE BOX The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D C



[38] THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF MORBILLI
National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, Loan



PORTRAIT OF MADAME MALO
Collection Chester Dale, New York



HORSES WITH JOCKEYS Courtesy Yale University Art Gallery



THE RACETRACK Durand-Ruel





AT THE RACES (GENTLEMEN RIDERS)
Louvre Museum, Paris



PORTRAIT OF MADAME V The Fogg Museum of Art
Harvard University, Massachusetts



SELF-PORTRAIT AT 23 The Art Institute of Chicago,
Collection Joseph B. Fair Fund



DANCING GIRLS BEHIND THE FRAME WORK OF A FLAT
[46] Collection Mrs. Edward Jonas, New York



DANCING GIRLS detail

