



c. 1884

Pastel on paper

Sheet: 25 3/4 x 19 7/8 inches (65.4 x 50.5 cm)

**HILAIRE-GERMAIN-EDGAR
DEGAS**

French

John G. Johnson Collection, 1917,
Cat. 969

BALLET FROM AN OPERA BOX

The setting for this pastel is the Palais Garnier Opéra House, where you can still attend performances today. The Palais Garnier is famous for its opulent and luxurious interior. However, instead of focusing on this richly ornamented space, Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) concentrates on the colorful dancers, the theatrical lighting, and the audience’s overwhelming visual experience.

A finely dressed woman rests her arm on a balcony railing and looks over her shoulder to watch the performance from a box seat above the stage. A dancer in a bright yellow and orange costume is taking a bow. Degas portrays the spectacle from a disorienting point of view, cutting off the central figures with other figures or with the edges of the picture frame.

He loved using pastel because he could scribble lines but also use his fingers to smudge broad areas of color—the pastel was soft and malleable and it did not dry hard like paint. Today the word “pastel” is often associated with pale shades of colors, but Degas liked to use strong vibrant hues to capture the effects of light and shadow.

LOOKING QUESTIONS

This picture has a foreground, middle ground, and background. How does the brightness or darkness of the pastels in these areas affect the composition? Is the distance from the woman in the foreground to the dancers in the background long, deep, or short? This work is missing a horizon line that anchors our view. How does it make you feel?

The woman in the balcony has a fan in her left hand. What color is the fan? Describe the colors that Degas uses. Are they soft or strong, bright or dull? Describe the types of strokes he used. Are they thick or thin? How many descriptive words can you come up with?

Pretend you are sitting next to the woman in the balcony. Could you hear the music? What kind of music is it, loud or soft? What kind of instruments could you hear?

Degas is known for his vivid use of light and shadow. The artificial gaslights of the stage cannot be seen here; however, can you tell they are there? Where is the light coming from, above or below? Does the light fall softly and evenly across the figures? Or does it highlight some areas and leave others in deep shadow? How does the light affect the mood?