

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Edgar Degas has achieved enormous popularity as the foremost artist of the ballet, renowned for his richly colored pastels of stage performances, incisive studies of individual dancers, and spectacular sculptures of ballerinas in action. In his lifetime, he was already known as “the painter of dancers,” with more than half his vast output of drawings, prints, and paintings devoted to the on- and off-stage activities of dance students and stars.

Degas and the Dance illuminates the artist’s dance images and sculptures—and Degas’ obsession with the subject—in a new way. Rather than following the stylistic development of Degas’ art or gathering together a familiar group of pictures, both the exhibition and catalogue situate his ballet imagery in the world of the Paris Opéra and the intricately documented history of dance. New research for this project has opened up the subject of the artist’s firsthand knowledge of the dance. For example, guest curators Richard Kendall and Jill DeVonyar identify many pictures for the first time as direct responses to encounters with specific performances and ballerinas. They also reexamine the long misunderstood history of Degas’ activities as a backstage artist. Working in dance libraries and archives in the U.S. and Europe, Mr. Kendall and Ms. DeVonyar have amassed important new material on the subject and promote a new appreciation for a fundamental aspect of the artist’s oeuvre. Their extensive research in the archives of the Paris Opéra has led to fresh insights into the identity of Degas’ depicted stages and rehearsal rooms, links those to records and photographs of the buildings, and confirms his access to

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restricted areas within the Opéra. This research raises questions about the role of realism, and the play of memory and invention in the artist's dance vocabulary.

Much of the exhibition is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, bringing together works related to such aspects as the dancers' training, rehearsals, and performances. In this way, the significance of events shown by the artist often is elucidated for the first time and the nature of Degas' preoccupations more fully evaluated. One group of works deals with formal and informal dance practice, stressing the artist's fascination with the exercise routines of the corps de ballet and the largely unglamorous settings in which they took place. Seen in this way, many of Degas' studies—such as his drawings of dancers at the barre or of exhausted individuals at rest—come suddenly to life, reminding us of the artist's incisiveness as an observer and his identification with his hard-working subjects. Another section of the exhibition moves to the rehearsal room, where group exercises take place under the eye of *répétiteurs* (rehearsal masters), musicians, and chaperones. Again, well-known representations of such scenes take on fresh meaning when the significance of the action, costumes, and location are understood, and when key pictures are hung beside less celebrated, but equally powerful, studies of similar subjects.

Subsequent themes include backstage life—with an exploration of the seamier side of the dancers' world and the role of their male "admirers"—and glimpses of dressing rooms and off-stage lassitude; the performance itself, showing ballet at its most sumptuous and the artist's mastery of color, light, and structure; and the shadowy world of the wings, where dancers wait and the corps prepares for its moment of glory in the footlights. In each case, pictures have been chosen for their outstanding

individual qualities as exemplars of Degas' art, as well as their capacity to deepen the public's engagement with the broader theme of the exhibition. Closely related clusters of exceptional works—such as drawings of dancers annotated with observations on their technique, brilliantly colored late pastels of the ballet, and studies of naked dancers from Degas' last years—are shown together, while overdue attention is directed to the changing meanings of dance in the course of Degas' long career. Degas' dance images are further illuminated by a range of comparative material—*carte-de-visite* photographs of dancers known to Degas, stage and costume designs for productions he depicted, and works by other dance artists.

A major distinction of Degas' art has always been the notable differences between his pictures and sculptures of the ballet and those of his contemporaries, or the wealth of prints, photographs, and popular images of the day. Though he remains a pioneer in many important ways, Degas' originality can only be understood against an awareness of the work of his contemporaries and of his disciples and imitators. *Degas and the Dance* and the accompanying catalogue add a new dimension to Degas' art, constituting a definitive account of Degas and dance at the beginning of a new century.