



1880

Oil on canvas

32 3/8 x 30 1/4 inches
(82.2 x 76.8 cm)

Framed: 41 9/16 x 39 5/8 x 2 5/8 inches
(105.6 x 100.6 x 6.7 cm)

**HILAIRE-GERMAIN-
EDGAR DEGAS**

French

Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach
Fund, 1937, W1937-2-1

LET'S LOOK

Who are the people in this painting? How can you tell? How many are there? Do any of them look similar?

Look at the large, empty space in the middle of the painting. Is it vertical, horizontal, or diagonal?

Which figures and parts of the room are cropped (cut off)? Which ones overlap?

Where is the light in this room coming from? Do you think there is a window or a light outside the frame?

THE BALLET CLASS

Edgar Degas once said, “No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. A picture is an artificial work, outside nature. It calls for as much cunning as the commission of a crime.” Yet this painting almost seems spontaneous—Degas has captured young ballerinas of the Paris opera house at their most natural, when they are practicing unselfconsciously behind the scenes, not performing for the public. *The Ballet Class* is full of such paradoxes, or contradictions.

We typically think of ballerinas as glamorous and inherently graceful. Yet all five of these dancers are shown in awkward poses. In fact, one of the dancers toward the back of the painting—the one trying to balance on the toe of her shoe—is about to fall over! Another dancer, on the right side and toward the front, is looking downward as if checking the placement of her legs and feet. And in front of them all, partially blocking our view, is an ordinary woman slumped in a chair, reading the newspaper. We can't help but wonder why the artist decided to put her there. She may be the mother of one of the girls, making sure her daughter performs well—a young ballerina's salary could be the main income for an entire family.

When we look at this painting, we are confronted by a large, empty, diagonal space between the two groups of figures that is punctuated only by a few faint lines laid out like a grid on the floor. The floor appears to be tilted, ending in a brown band of molding, a yellow wall, and a window. Wait! Is that a window, or is it a mirror? Look carefully and you will see that the back of one of the dancers is reflected. You can also see a city scene reflected. This scene is a view through a window located beyond the right edge of the painting.

Degas himself was a common sight in the rehearsal rooms of the Paris opera house. Like other upper-class Parisians, he subscribed (bought season tickets) to the ballet and attended performances

there several times a week. As a subscriber, he was allowed to wander through the rehearsal halls and mingle with the young dancers whenever he wanted. One ballerina remembered him as a man who wore blue-lensed glasses (to protect his poor eyesight) and often stopped the young dancers to draw them. Fascinated by the hard work it took to become a ballerina, Degas created far more paintings of dancers rehearsing than performing.

This painting, *The Ballet Class*, was purchased by Alexander Cassatt in 1881 through the efforts of his sister, Mary Cassatt, a great friend of Edgar Degas. *The Ballet Class* remained in the Cassatt family until 1937, when it was purchased for the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Edgar Degas was born in 1834, the eldest son of a banker in Paris, France. Degas's father wanted him to be a lawyer, and it was only after Degas had left home and worked hard at his art for several years that his father took his ambitions seriously.

With his parents' support, Degas was able to study at the École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Paris, and then to live and travel in Italy, studying great art from the past. He took to heart the words of the artist he admired most, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres—"Draw lines, young man, many lines, from memory or nature; it is this way that you will become a good painter." Degas became skilled in drawing, believing that it should be the foundation of his art.

For five years Degas showed his paintings at the official Salons—art exhibitions organized each year by the French government. Then in 1874 he and some artist friends decided to organize separate exhibitions and call themselves the "Independents." When they were scornfully labeled the "Impressionists" by an art critic, that name stuck. The Impressionists painted their impressions of ordinary life at home, in the city, and in the countryside. Unlike other painters of the time they were not interested in making grand compositions depicting great military heroes of history or gods and goddesses of ancient myth. And in making their paintings, the Impressionists used looser, more visible brushstrokes and brighter color combinations than most other artists.

Unlike many of his Impressionist friends, Degas preferred to work indoors and focused primarily on the human figure as his subject. But he also painted scenes of modern life, often cropping or cutting off portions of the figures to give a spontaneous look to his pictures. While Degas's most popular works are images of ballet dancers, he also photographed and made portraits of his friends and

family and painted pictures of horse racing, modern life, and the female figure. Late in his life, when he was nearly blind, Degas made wax figurines of dancers and horses. These were cast in bronze after his death in 1917.

THE WORLD OF THE IMPRESSIONISTS

Impressionist artists wanted to capture the changing effects of light in the world around them and to show life in casual glimpses. Their art left behind the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), the bloody battles of the city government—or Commune—of Paris against the national government of France (March 18–May 28, 1871), and the economic depression that followed. Instead, Impressionist art focused on pleasant scenes of the countryside, cafés, the theater, and the grand new boulevards being built in Paris. Looking at Impressionist paintings of the 1870s and 1880s it is hard to believe that they were made just after Paris had been devastated by shelling and by 36,000 deaths from starvation.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Degas composed this painting by clustering and overlapping figures, and by cropping some of the figures and parts of the rehearsal hall. Look how the seated woman in the foreground overlaps the dancer standing just behind her; she, in turn, overlaps the ballet instructor and the dancer with the pink sash. What is cropped on the right side of the painting? Find magazine pictures of groups of people and use two L-shaped pieces of paper or cardboard to frame and crop parts of them.

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

- How does Degas use colors, brushstrokes, lines, and shadows to enliven the empty areas of the wall and floor?
- Degas organized his composition in sets of rectangles and triangles. The yellow wall is a rectangle. If you drew a line connecting the bright yellow sash, the pink sash, and the dark blue dress, you would make a triangle. Look for other geometric shapes or groupings.
- Did you notice how much the bald head of the ballet master looks like the mother's hat? Do you find anything else humorous about this painting? Are there serious aspects? How would you describe the mood in this ballet class? Make your own list of words describing the mood, then compare and discuss your list with a classmate.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Pretend that you are as wealthy as Alexander Cassatt and that you would like to commission a painting by Edgar Degas. Write a letter to Monsieur Degas telling him why you admire his work and what theme you would like to see depicted in the painting.
- Imagine that some of the figures in this painting come to life. Give them names and describe what they might be thinking. Think about what might have happened just before this scene and what might happen next. Look for clues in the painting and use your imagination as you write.

This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.