

Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

Degas was the son of wealthy Parisian parents and had a classical training as a history painter. He travelled to Italy in order to study the Renaissance art. He had a great interest in movement (and the photographer Muybridge), which led him to observe contemporary culture, and he began to paint racehorses, and figures in motion, particularly ballet dancers and opera dancers.

While copying a Velasquez painting in the Louvre Museum Degas met Manet, who encouraged him to paint modern life. Manet introduced him to the impressionist painters at the cafe Guerbois. Degas absorbed some Impressionist techniques. He helped to organise the first impressionist exhibition. He participated in all the exhibitions except one, but his work is slightly more independent in feel to the rest of the group.

Personal Style and Technique

His 'snapshot' composition technique and work in mixed media along with his fascination with the effects of artificial light established his painting as truly unique. Degas's snapshot compositions were inspired by photography. He was interested in how spontaneous a scene appeared when the composition was cropped to create a close-up view, often abruptly cutting off the edges of the composition or even parts of the focal point of the picture. He added this to his work creating a sense of impulseivness, action and intimacy, his compositions were often divided diagonally. Later in his career, Degas made wax models of ballet dancers and horses which were cast in bronze after his death.

Subject Matter

Degas wanted to show the life going on behind the scenes. He portrayed his subjects as if they did not realise they were being observed. His themes include:

- Contemporary life in the streets and cafes of Paris
- Expressive movements of ballet dancers
- Horse racing
- Everyday scenes, such as a woman combing her hair

The Dancing Class, c. 1873-75

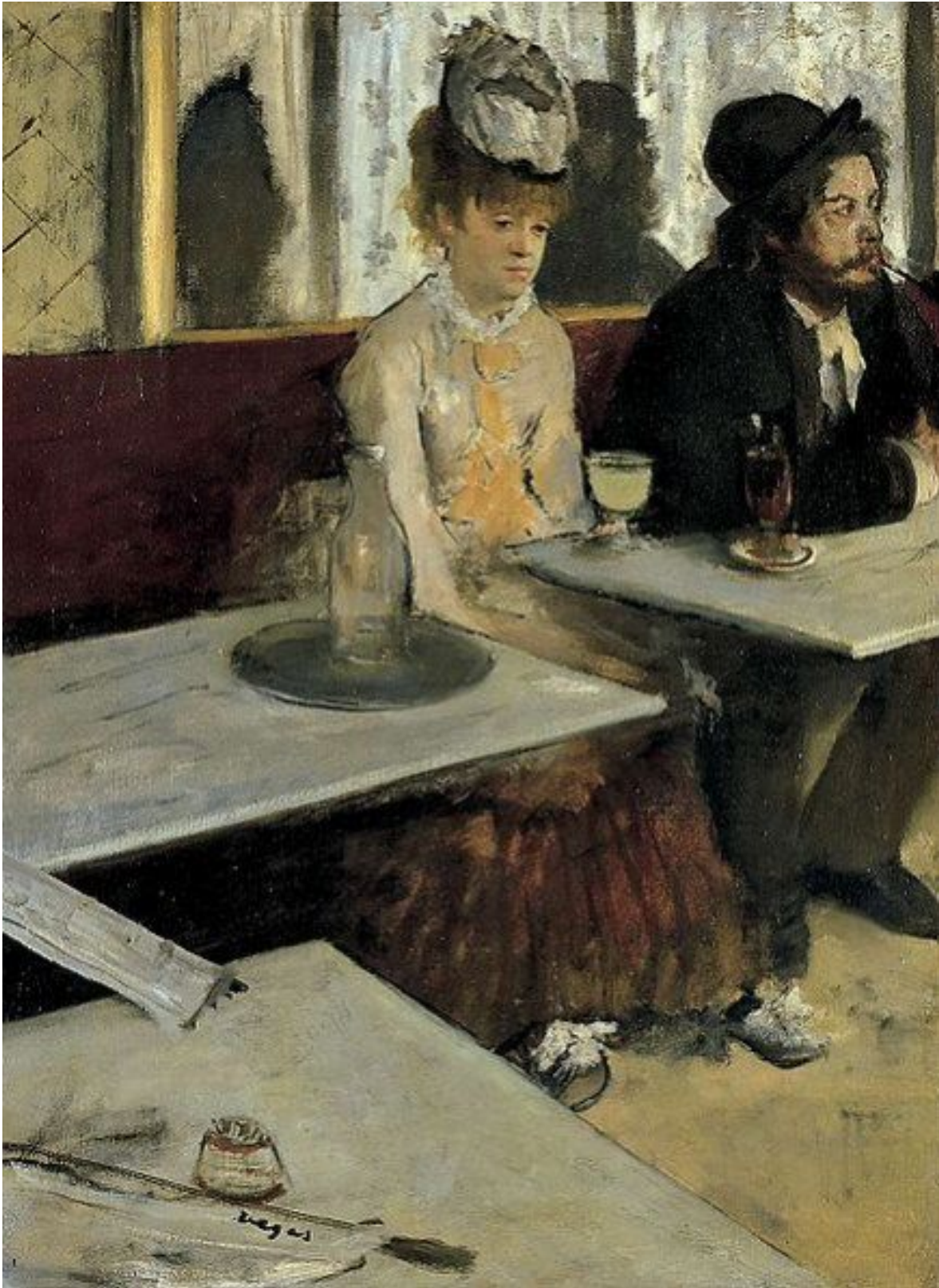
- Degas focuses on the informal scene of a training session of the chorus instead of the stars of the stage.
- Most of the dancers are seen taking a break, while the dance master Jules Perrot teaches one dancer her steps.
- The setting of the painting is the opera in the Rue le Peletier in Paris which Degas visited regularly to sketch the dancers.

- Degas's composition is a wonderful exploration of spatial depth.
- He presents the scene from a slightly raised viewpoint.
- The format of the painting changed over two years. Originally there were two dancers in the foreground facing outwards towards the viewer, while the figure of the dance teacher was facing the back wall of the studio. In 1875, Degas changed the stance of Perrot and one of the girls, who now faces inwards, also adding the figure of the girl seated on the piano on the left.
- The other girl who was originally portrayed looking out is now semi-covered by the girl on the piano. Degas enhances the sense of depth in this large space by use of the floorboards to create natural perspective lines and by the carefully constructed perspective lines of the ceiling and doorway.
- This is further strengthened by the use of aerial perspective as the smaller figures in the background show much less detail than the ones in the foreground.
- Even his use of the colour red running through the picture, from the red bow in the girl in the foreground hair, to the fan in her hand and further back to a hat worn by a figure at the back wall serves to unify the painting and draw our eye deep into the work.
- The light source comes from the tall windows in the right. Their reflection in the mirror creates a second source of light.
- The blue and yellow sashes are bright against the white dresses and the sober green background.
- The large, empty space running diagonally across the studio is key to the composition, it draws immediate attention to the ballet master, it links the two groups and it creates a strong contrast with the busy figures.
- The snapshot technique he was famous for is also visible here, cutting off part of the figure of the dancer on the right to create a sense of spontaneity.
- Degas often reused his favourite dance poses over and over in his paintings and sketches. The informality of this work has a fresh appeal to the viewer, as each character portrayed conveys different attitudes through their postures.
- The girl on the piano scratches her back, another adjusts an earring, while the seated figures in the background chat.
- Somewhat out of place a small dog appears at the feet of the girl in the foreground looking out at the spectator.
- The cello silhouetted against the window is reflected in the mirror and is a reminder that music is the lifeblood of dance.



L'Absinthe, 1876

- This painting portrays two figures in a Parisian cafe.
- It provoked controversy when first shown in London in 1893.
- The models were Degas's fellow artist Marcellin Desboutin and actress Ellen Andree. They posed under artificial light in his studio.
- The woman dressed in dreary tones of brown and beige, sits with a dull, glazed expression while in front of her is a glass of the absinthe. Her eyes downcast and expression one of hopelessness.
- Beside her the man, pipe clenched between his teeth, stares fixedly out of the window. Degas was often criticised for his unfeeling portrayal of people in his paintings and this was probably the most famous of these.
- There is no idealization in these characters, who slouch in their seats, unspeaking, giving the impression of disillusionment and boredom.
- This was seen as an unfit subject for an artist: the patrons of the arts had no wish to be presented with such a depressing image of working-class life. The painting was a harsh commentary on the dangers of alcohol abuse. Absinthe was an addictive and extremely harmful liquor.
- The composition is revolutionary. The figures are shown in the top right of the picture, while the rest of the space is broken up the large flat shapes of the table tops.
- The zig zag arrangement of space shows the influence of Japanese pictorial composition.
- The picture has the spontaneous immediacy of a quickly taken photograph, capturing a moment in time.
- The edges of the paintings dramatically cut off the end of man's pipe, his arm and the ends of the table.
- A large triangular tabletop protrudes into the space from the bottom left, making the viewer feel as if they are seated on the other side of it, watching the scene from within the space of the cafe.
- On the foreground table there is a match container and a newspaper on a baton, Degas has signed the painting along this baton and the matchstick holder is like a small pot of paint. This all gives the impression that the artist himself has been sitting there. The folded newspaper forms a bridge to the next table and draws the viewer in,
- Degas's painting is fluid and smooth, blurring the features and dress of the characters. There are some darker forms however, seen on the shoulder of the woman and the edge of the table in front of her, distinguishing his work from that of the other Impressionists.
- Sombre colours underline the mood of the painting. Blacks are pitched against creamy whites and combined with pale yellows and translucent greens. The overall feeling is one of gloom.



Degas disliked the word 'Impressionist', preferring to call himself a 'realist' or 'Independent'.

What did Degas have in common with the impressionists?

- Portrayed contemporary life
- Tried to catch the fleeting moment
- Worked independently of the salon judges
- Left an unfinished look to some of his paintings
- Was influenced by photography (cropped views)
- Imitated unusual angles of Japanese prints

How did Degas differ from the Impressionists?

- Carefully pictorial compositions of his paintings
- Emphasised clear line in figure drawing
- Used shading to give his figures three-dimensional solidity
- Generally concentrated on indoor scenes
- Produced a huge amount of work using chalk pastels

Influence

In the 1980s Degas had begun to sell his work privately through a dealer. He chose not to publicly hold exhibitions of his own work, which may have been a result of his private character. Nevertheless, Degas's drawing ability was greatly admired by other artists. In particular, Gauguin and Picasso admire Degas for his superb use of line and colour in his pastel drawings.

Exam Questions

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Edgar Degas (1834 -1917) was a founding member of the Impressionists but was unique amongst his contemporaries in terms of style and subject matter.

Discuss this statement with reference to a named work by Degas, refer in your answer to subject matter, composition, light and colour, and handling of materials.

and

How did the development of photography influence the work of the Impressionists?

Illustrate your answer.