

EDGAR DEGAS'S LAST YEARS: MAKING ART THAT DANCED

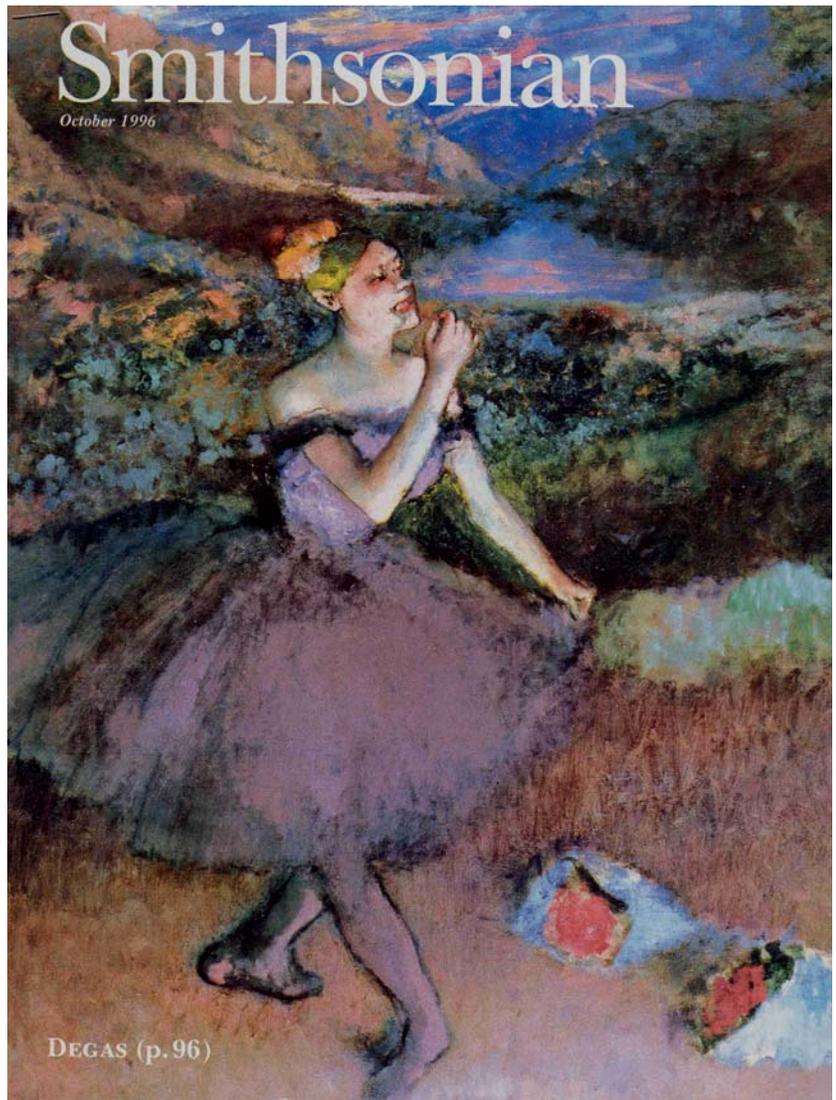
**Martin Bailey, *Smithsonian*,
October, 1996**

An exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago proves that, contrary to popular wisdom, the Impressionist master just kept getting better

"I want people to believe me wicked," Edgar Degas once confessed to his niece. It was Degas himself who did the most to spread the scandalous stories that so famously surrounded his later years. The aging artist relished portraying himself as a recluse and hinted at licentiousness with his female models. He spoke disparagingly about his work, claiming to be going blind. Those around him tended to accept much of what he said, and Paul-Andre Lemoisne, the artist's biographer, chronicled how Degas lapsed into "premature retirement," resigning himself to the "loneliness of old age."

Degas reinforced this image of a curmudgeonly artist in his last self-portrait (see below), dating from the late 1890s. He has a worn-out, lugubrious expression, his hair has turned white and the redness around his eyes suggests the problems with his sight. In the background is a sketchy pastel of one of his own works, a woman drying her hair. There is a poignant contrast between the aging artist and the female in her prime. Yet after completing this self-portrait, done in his mid-60s, Degas would work for nearly 15 more years. During this period he was to create some of his finest works.

An exhibition now at the Art Institute of Chicago challenges the myths about Degas's later years, with a display of a hundred oil paintings, pastels, charcoal drawings and sculptures. "Degas: beyond Impressionism," which opened September 30 and runs until January 5, 1997 (sponsored by J. P. Morgan), is one of those shows that will change the



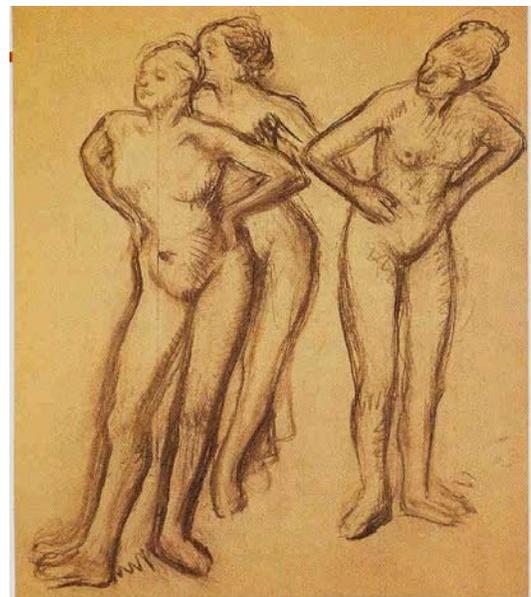
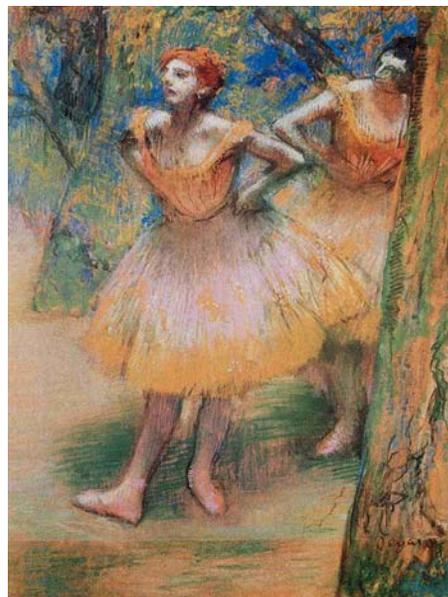
way we see an artist's work. Its argument, put simply, is that we have been wrong to write off the last third of Degas's life. "The late work of Degas is just as powerful as what he did before. In terms of his influence on 20th-century art, it was even more important," claims British art historian Richard Kendall, guest curator and author of the exhibition catalog (distributed by Yale University Press). The 1880s were a period of transition for Degas. In 1884 he had marked his 50th birthday, an event that, Kendall points out in the catalog, set off a personal crisis. Reflecting on his celibacy, his failing eyesight and what he regarded as his uncertain artistic achievement, he wrote to a friend: "I have lost the thread of things . . . I piled up my plans in a cupboard for which I always had the key. And now I've lost the key." Two years later the final Impressionist exhibition was held in Paris, effectively ending the movement with which Degas had been so closely associated. The 1880s

also saw important changes in Degas's art, both in subject matter and technique. In his Impressionist days, he had depicted laundresses and milliners, scenes from cafe-concerts and brothels, the ballet stage, jockeys at the racetrack and society portraits. Increasingly, however, his work became dominated by female figures, usually dancers or bathers. At the same time, he began to move away from oil paints to pastels, which he used to create shimmering color effects. His compositions became simpler, done in a broader, more expressive style.

"Degas: beyond Impressionism," which has just finished its successful opening run at the National Gallery in London, concentrates on the period from 1890, when the artist was 56, to his death in 1917. Organized by Kendall, with cocurators Douglas Druick of the Art Institute of Chicago and John Leighton of London's National Gallery, it is the first exhibition to focus on this period. "We are trying to explore and probe what Degas was really doing in his later years," explains Druick. An examination of the artist's techniques has provided new insights into his unusual choice of tracing paper on which to draw and the special role that sculpture played in his work. Recent research has revealed that contrary to assumptions, Degas continued to exhibit in his later years and remained an active member of the Parisian art scene. He worked right up until his late 70s, and many pictures have been wrongly dated to earlier years. These new findings suggest that although there is some truth in the image of Degas the recluse, particularly at the very end of his life, the reality is more complicated and considerably more interesting.

Degas's living arrangements provide a telling insight into his personality and work habits. In 1890 he rented the top floor of an apartment building at 37 Rue Victor Masse, on the southern fringes of Montmartre, already an established base for artists and galleries. Initially Degas had another apartment nearby where he slept, but by 1897 he had given this up and taken the two floors beneath his studio. The three floors provided spacious accommodation for a bachelor, but by this time Degas was a successful artist and well off (his major indulgence was buying pictures for his impressive collection).

At 37 Rue Victor Masse, life was highly compartmentalized. The second floor, with his bedroom, was his private domain. On the floor above were the salons where he received visitors, and it was here that the conventions of bourgeois life were strictly observed. His studio was on the top floor, a dusty area crammed with paraphernalia. The concierge once succinctly summed up the divisions for a visitor: "Degas sleeps on the second, eats on the third and works on the fourth."



Three works, in three different media, illustrate the intensity with which Degas studied all aspects of a single pose. The lead figure in *Two Dancers*, the pastel above, also appears in the charcoal study and is depicted again in the bronze sculpture. The sculpture—originally a wax study that Degas created as an aid to understanding the pose, rather than for exhibition—was cast in bronze only after he died.

The second floor was kept locked and was opened only to his closest friends, but for the privileged visitor it was a treasure trove. Walter Sickert, the British painter, recalled being ushered into the large room that Degas called his "museum," containing dozens of the finest works from his private collection. Sickert threaded his way "through the forest of easels standing so close to each other that we could hardly pass between them, each one groaning under a life

size portrait by Ingres, or holding early Corots." Although mostly works by 19th-century French artists, the collection included a scattering of old masters, such as two El Grecos. Degas kept his personal favorites in his bedroom, including paintings and studies by Delacroix and Manet, as well as some of his own pictures. Above his bed hung an erotic Japanese print of courtesans in a bathhouse.

Visitors were normally received on the third floor, where, as Kendall writes, "the proprieties of middle-class life were respected to an extraordinary degree." Degas dressed in a dark suit to receive his guests, welcoming them in the two large salons and a dining room, furnished in an old-fashioned, almost grandiose style. All the walls were densely hung with pictures, and there were cabinets of sculptures, displays of Japanese books and piles of lithographs. On the same floor Zoe Closier, his fierce but loyal housekeeper, had her room.

The studio on the fourth floor could hardly have been a greater contrast, a scene that Degas's artist friend Paul Lafond called an "indescribable disorder." Among those who attempted to record the setting was Pauline, a model who came to know the room intimately: "Although vast, it was gloomy, because the high north-facing windows . . . were almost obstructed by a linen curtain, . . . only a dim daylight filtered in, hardly reaching the end of the studio. This feeble light was interrupted everywhere by cupboards, numerous easels jumbled together, sculpture stands, tables, armchairs, stools, several screens and even a bathtub used for posing models . . ." The only space left for Degas to work was very confined, at the front of the studio just under the windows. Pauline hated the dust; the housekeeper was forbidden to sweep the studio except around the stove, the modeling platform and a narrow strip running down the middle of the room. Apart from these small areas, Degas did not want his studio clutter disturbed. Although the models sometimes asked the housekeeper to dust the bench where they left their clothes, Zoe always reminded them of "Monsieur's ruling."



A rare foray into what Degas termed fantasy, *Steep Coast* (left), 1890-92, portrays a landscape that is actually a recumbent woman, her hair loosely hanging at right. His pastel *Self-Portrait* (above) is also from the 1890s.

For work, Degas dressed in an old smock, like the one he wears in the self-portrait. Up in the studio, he adopted the persona of the reclusive artist, moody and stubborn. "Behind his studio door," writes Kendall, "he could sink into melancholic torpor, worrying about his eyesight or brooding on death, grumbling at his models or simply staring into the fire." In his earlier days, Degas had studied his subjects in the real world, frequenting the racetrack, the cafe-concert and the opera for inspiration. But by this time his pictures were nearly always contrivances of the studio, based on his memories. Amid the clutter, a small section of the room would be cleared for the model and the props. By arranging a zinc tub and a chair, he created an intimate bath. A model in a tutu, with a drape as a curtain, became a dancer.

Females, often nude, were to form the basis for Degas's art until the end of his life. Indeed, apart from several dozen landscapes done in the 1890s, virtually all of Degas's late pictures are of women, usually of ballerinas and of bathers drying themselves. On the few occasions when he made

landscapes, he sometimes could not resist including the hidden image of a reclining figure in the scene. Look carefully at *Steep Coast* of the early 1890s (above) and the two tall hills on the left emerge as her thighs, two conical hillocks in the center are her breasts, and her head lies by the coast, with flowing auburn hair cascading down into the water and forming the cliff (the image of the woman can be seen more easily if the picture is turned onto its left side).

Degas's obsession with the female body has been a cause for considerable comment. Here was an elderly, unmarried man working with nude models in the privacy of his studio, producing pictures that appeared voyeuristic. As he once claimed to his artist friend Georges Jeannot: "Women can never forgive me; they hate me, they feel that I am disarming them. I show them without their coquetry." The women look very ordinary, not glamorized, and it is noticeable that his models appear to age as the artist grew older.

Degas's images still evoke strong reactions. To some, the pictures are disquieting. The artist seems to be invading the privacy of his models and exploiting their vulnerability. Other viewers have a quite different response, seeing the images as a celebration of the human form. Kendall takes this latter view, pointing out that the women are often depicted from behind, almost modestly, and he believes the pictures are among the "most prudish nudes in Western art."

Degas's own sexuality remains a mystery. He never married, nor had a mistress, but he did keep a circle of female friends and confidants. He invariably treated his models with propriety, and they seem to have felt at ease with him. On one occasion, when Degas was 75, he began humming a tune and ended up jokingly dancing around the studio with his model Pauline, who was naked except for a pair of slippers. Degas would probably be pleased that his private sexuality remains an enigma.

One of the most important achievements of the Chicago exhibition is the telling way it explores Degas's techniques. In later years he turned from oil paints to drawing with charcoal and pastels, with which he conjured up what he once described as "orgies of color." An examination of his pictures has revealed how he built up a multiplicity of hues, often stabilizing a color by spraying on a fixative, thereby sealing the dusty pastel to prevent it from smudging. He then added another layer, and so on. The effect of building up these layers is to make his colors sing. According to Jean Sutherland Boggs, the Degas expert who masterminded the 1988-89 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as the years went by the artist's "colors became stronger and harsher, his handling richer, and his line more brutal."

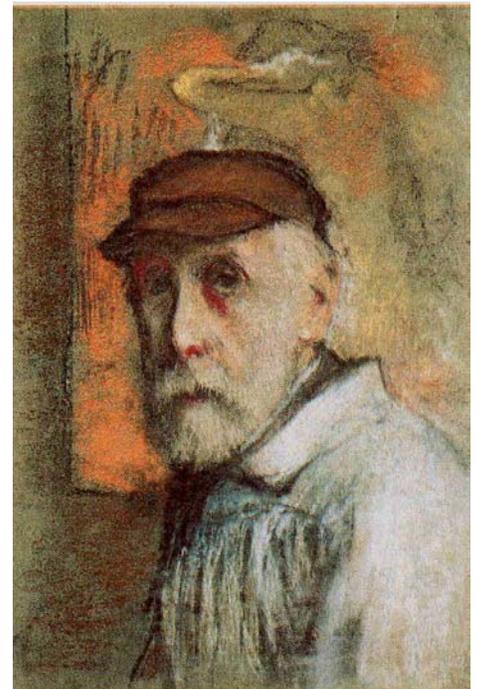
Until now little attention has been devoted to Degas's unusual choice of materials. He usually drew on tracing paper, which was generally shunned by other artists because of its fragility and lack of surface texture. For Degas, however, it suited the exploratory line of his drawing, allowing his charcoal and pastels to wander freely over the smooth surface. But the main reason for using tracing paper was to enable him to copy his images, a technique that became central to his art. The copy was never a simple replica, but a starting point for a new work. In the copy, the lines of a figure could be altered, perhaps by shifting the position of a leg or clothing a nude figure. The new version could be colored differently, giving an opportunity to explore the effect of a new combination of hues. A single figure could be incorporated into a larger composition.

A pair of pictures in the Chicago exhibition that demonstrate how Degas would color similar images to produce very different effects and emotions are *Dancers, Pink and Green* and the later *Blue Dancers*. Although painted in oils, they must have been based on the same sketch or related ones, most likely made on tracing paper and transferred to canvas. The spring-like atmosphere of the pink and green contrasts with the cooler tones of the blue. Using copies of images, the artist experimented with endless variations of color, producing stunning effects.

Another unusual aspect of Degas's way of working was his use of sculpture. Degas once described sculpture as a "blind man's trade," a comment that encouraged the view that failing eyesight had forced him to substitute modeling for painting. However, research suggests that Degas actually used his sculptures as an aid to assist his drawing. With wax, Degas would sculpt a figure from life. From this he would make a series of drawings, depicting the figure from various positions. For example, the sculpture *Grand Arabesque, Second Time* of the 1880s portrays a dancer in an outstretched pose that would have been very tiring for a model to hold for any length of time. But having



With its shimmering and subtle colors, *Before the Ballet*, 1890-92, is characteristic of Edgar Degas's later works. Typical, also, is the emphasis on one or two figures, preoccupied with their tasks and oblivious of the viewer.



completed the sculpture, the artist could create a series of drawings from the wax figure, viewed from different angles. One of these, done two decades later, is a rough charcoal sketch of the same dancer, seen from slightly above. Degas did not see his sculptures as independent works of art, and it was only after his death that the fragile waxes were rescued from his studio by family and friends and cast in bronze.

The use of tracing paper and sculptures enabled Degas to concentrate on pursuing a limited number of themes through hundreds of works. "It is essential to do the same subject over again, ten times, a hundred times," he once advised his friend Paul-Albert Bartholome. Hardly any of his pictures are dated, and his habit of constantly returning to earlier images adds to the difficulty of determining when they were done (some of the works in the Chicago exhibition are dated to a ten-year period). It was long assumed that Degas made few pictures after 1900 and only a small number after 1905, when he was 70. But recent research suggests that some works previously dated to the 1890s were done in the early years of the 20th century. For example, Kendall has redated the pastel *Seated Bather Drying her Neck*, ascribed to 1894 in the standard Degas catalogue raisonne, to 1905-10. He argues that the densely textured execution and the swaths of brilliant color, which create an almost abstract design, are typical of the artist's final period.

As the years went by and Degas's artistic reputation continued to rise, word spread that he had become a fierce curmudgeon, rudely turning away visitors from his studio. On one notorious occasion, recorded by Sickert, several people he did not know arrived at his door and politely inquired if they were disturbing him. Degas shouted out the single word "Beaucoup!" ("Very much!"), leading to their sudden departure. But after recounting the incident, Sickert added his own sympathetic comment: "If the greatest painter of the age, who happens not to keep a footman, may not, in broad daylight, say that he is occupied, when, in God's name, is it proposed that he should paint?" Degas himself encouraged stories about his antisocial behavior, probably in an effort to protect his privacy. His legendary reclusiveness was much exaggerated.

Although Degas once described commercial galleries as brothels, his pictures sold well through some of the leading Parisian dealers of the time. However, it is often said that the works were rarely exhibited, and he was thought to have had only two one-man shows in his lifetime. These were in 1892 at the Durand-Ruel gallery in Paris and in 1911 at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. But evidence has now been discovered of a third one-man show at Durand-Ruel in New York in 1901. Several other more informal displays were held, including an important one at Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1896, which was almost a mini-retrospective. Kendall concludes that his work was widely seen, both in the studio and at dealers, and that "the inaccessibility of Degas's art is one of the flimsiest artistic myths."



An intimate scene in opulent color, Degas's *Combing the Hair*, c. 1892-96, was once owned by Henri Matisse.

If one has to date the end of Degas's creative career, it probably occurred with his move from Rue Victor Masse. In 1912 the owners of the building decided to demolish it, and the 78-year-old artist was forced to move out, finding accommodation two blocks away in the Boulevard de Clichy. Understandably, the move depressed him, and his health was fading fast. His eyesight had already deteriorated, making him intolerant of bright sunshine and forcing him to wear dark glasses outdoors. By 1917 he had become very weak, and the sculptor Paul Paulin recorded after a visit: "He dreams, he eats, he sleeps." On September 27 Degas, age 83, died of cerebral congestion. France was at war when a group of a hundred colleagues assembled for his funeral. The American painter Mary Cassatt recorded in a letter: "We buried him on Saturday, a beautiful sunshine, a little crowd of friends and admirers, all very quiet and peaceful in the midst of this dreadful upheaval of which he was barely conscious."

Kendall believes that Degas played a decisive role in the development of 20th-century art, an influence that is explored in a separate display of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago, "Edgar Degas: Passing on the Tradition" (through January 26, 1997). It is fascinating to speculate on the influence that the elderly Degas exerted on the youngest generation of Parisian artists. In 1903, the 22-year-old Georges Rouault developed a friendship with Degas, and he was soon inspired by the master's dancers, tackling the subject with an expressionistic verve. Although it is not known if they met, Henri Matisse knew Degas's work. A few

years after the death of Degas, he bought *Combing the Hair*, a picture whose powerful reds prefigure some of Matisse's own pictures. In 1902 the 20-year-old Picasso exhibited at a gallery at 25 Rue Victor Masse, but although he and Degas must have known each other's art and shared many acquaintances in common, it remains uncertain if they were in personal contact. Picasso's tribute came nearly 70 years later when he incorporated the smartly dressed figure of Degas among female nudes in dozens of etchings of brothel scenes. As Kendall sees it, "Degas and Picasso stand back-to-back at the turn of the century, like two sides of the modernist coin."



By 1899, when he created the pastel *Russian Dancers*, Degas had total mastery of the human body in motion.

Among Degas's own generation, Pierre-Auguste Renoir stands out as the artist with the greatest understanding of his work. Renoir once told the dealer Ambroise Vollard, "If Degas had died at 50, he would have been remembered as an excellent painter, no more: it is after his 50th year that his work broadened out and that he really becomes Degas." Until recently, this view would have been regarded as heresy by most admirers of Edgar Degas's Impressionist work, but the Chicago exhibition confirms the truth of Renoir's insight.

By Martin Bailey

A correspondent for the Art Newspaper, Martin Bailey is the author of recent works on Vermeer and Durer, as well as three books on Van Gogh.