

Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



EDGAR DEGAS | LAND ART | THE TITANIC AT 100 | HERB RITTS | DAN FLAVIN

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THE DIPLOMACY OF ORIENTALIST PAINTING



Ready For His Close-Up

A new exhibition of Herb Ritts' iconic commercial work proves that fashion photography isn't just posing as fine art.

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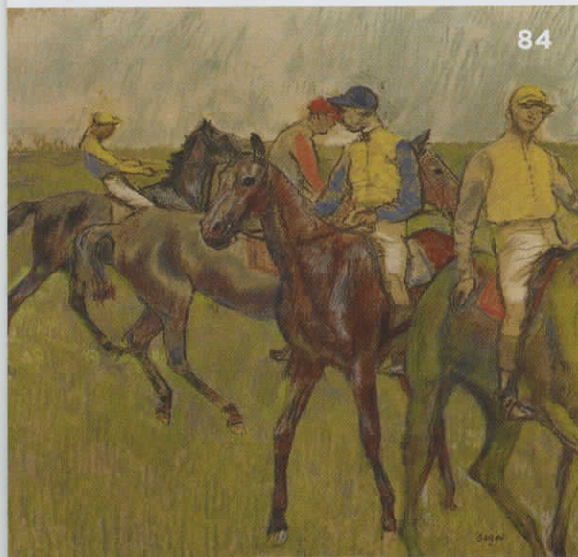


Uncommon Ground

In the Sixties, art left the galleries and museums and went back to the land. Four decades later, Land Art is coming indoors.

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Illustrious and Unknown

Edgar Degas kept a lot to himself—not only his private life but some of his most interesting artworks.

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ILLUSTRIOUS AND UNKNOWN

EDGAR DEGAS KEPT A GREAT DEAL TO HIMSELF—
NOT ONLY HIS PRIVATE LIFE BUT SOME OF
HIS MOST INTERESTING ARTWORKS.

By John Dorfman



Edgar Degas, *Heads of a Man and a Woman*, circa 1877-78, monotype.

Opposite page: *Self-Portrait*, 1857-58, oil on paper.

EDGAR DEGAS WAS A MAN OF CONTRADICTIONS. THE SCION OF AN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY, he maintained a patrician reserve and critical stance, yet he sympathized with ordinary people, accurately observed them and depicted them with dignity. He carefully cultivated a curmudgeonly persona but had a large circle of close friends and family for much of his life and gladly mentored younger artists. Contradictions appear in his work, too: Degas was a leader of the Impressionist movement and in some ways more modern than the Impressionists—and yet the classical Ingres was his idol and the Old Masters his constant point of reference. Degas was uncomfortable with public attention and once said, “I would like to be illustrious and unknown.”

He has largely gotten his wish. The critic John Canaday wrote, “Degas, one of the supreme artists not only of his rich century in France, but of any century anywhere, is also one of the most frustratingly elusive personalities.” Coincidentally, two current exhibitions—one at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine (through May 28) and the other at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (through May 20)—propose to take us into Degas’ private world. Though very different in scope, both shows rely on the artist’s less-known prints and drawings rather than his iconic ballet and equestrian paintings and pastels to make their point.

The Portland show, “Edgar Degas: The Private Impressionist,” while the larger of the two, is entirely based on one man’s collection—that of co-organizer Robert Flynn Johnson, curator emeritus of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts in San Francisco. (The show was created in partnership with Landau Traveling Exhibitions, an L.A.-based company that organizes and packages shows that are affordable to university museums and other smaller institutions.) Johnson has a passion for Degas and sees him as a sort of kindred spirit. Put together over a period of almost 40 years on a curator’s salary, the collection comprises not only works by Degas but also by artists in his circle, such as Henri Fantin-Latour, Félix Bracquemond, Mary Cassatt, James Whistler, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Stevens and James Tissot. Considering their history and provenance, it is only natural that they tend to reveal the private Degas—Johnson says, “Not one of my 21 drawings was ever

Edgar Degas and Auguste Clot, *Before the Race*, circa 1895, color lithograph.







ROBERT FLYNN JOHNSON



Edgar Degas in collaboration with Walter Barnes, *The Apotheosis of Degas*, 1885.
 Opposite page: *Mlle Dembowska*, circa 1858-59, black crayon on plum-colored paper.

sold during Degas' lifetime." They were done for the artist's own purposes and chart his development and experimentation.

Many are portraits, noteworthy for the sense of intimacy they convey. A drawing in black crayon on plum-colored paper of Mademoiselle Dembowska, a young relative of Degas' whom he drew while studying in Italy during the 1850s, is beautifully sensitive, the child's head fully though finely modeled while the rest of the body is merely suggested. Johnson calls this the "most important" Degas drawing in his collection. "This child is neither sweet nor sad," he says. "She's like a child with an adult inside; there's a knowing quality about her. The fact that Degas concentrated on the head and left the rest of the drawing with just a few faint outlines shows that he was doing it from life, just to please himself. He put it in his portfolio, and it never saw the light of day till the estate sale in 1918," following the artist's death the previous year.

"One sees this work that is heartbreakingly beautiful and wonders if the parents of that child ever saw it before it was whisked away." A circa 1854 self-portrait shows Degas himself rendered in Old Master style, in profile. It would have taken two mirrors for the artist to see himself from this angle, but such experimentation came naturally to Degas.

Several of the drawings emphasize Degas' grounding in academic technique and his admiration for the past. "Before Degas built the fourth floor, he built a really strong basement," says Johnson, "and that basement was his love of the Old Masters." He only met Ingres once, briefly, in 1855, but long enough for the 75-year-old to tell the 21-year-old, "Draw lines, young man, many lines." Early drawings in the Portland Museum exhibition show Degas taking that advice literally, copying classical sculpture, his pencil following the curve of a Greek or Roman statue's legs



and feet, the profile outline of a sculpted face. Degas remained grounded in line for the rest of his career; his eventual adoption of pastel was a brilliantly successful gambit to unite the virtues of painting and drawing in one medium.

Some of the prints in Johnson's collection show Degas in a particularly experimental, even casual mode. While most are etchings and drypoint, there are two works in monotype, a very unforgiving technique—essentially drawing with a brush in ink on a printing plate—that usually produces only one image, maybe two, rather than multiples, and requires that everything be gotten right the first time. According to Johnson, Degas learned monotype from his friend Lepic and became the only artist other than William Blake to “fully explore” the medium since its invention in the 17th century. One monotype depicts a formally dressed man and woman, their faces blurred by the brush. “This print has such total spontaneity,” says Johnson. “Making a monotype is like cooking a soufflé—it either works or it doesn't. This ill assorted couple is such a wonderful microcosm of the French bourgeoisie of the 1880s. The blur conveys motion, as if she has turned away from her husband, saying, ‘What a bore!’ Motion is a very important part of Degas' work.” Another monotype of two trees, very lightly rendered, suggests the Japanese woodblock prints that Degas admired.

Other prints in the collection show Japanese influence, for instance a very striking portrayal of *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre*, circa 1879–80, in etching, aquatint and drypoint. Seen from the back, Degas' protégée arches her back gracefully, seeming to trail her umbrella behind her rather than leaning on it. The image's vertical shape recalls the “pillar” format of Japanese prints, according to the catalogue notes, and the overlapping figures and the cropping of the picture space are also Japanese-influenced. But the print is also, as Johnson is quick to point out, photography-influenced. “There's a sense of the figure being partially obscured by the doorway—it's a photograph, a snapshot.”

That photography should have had an impact on Degas' art is hardly surprising; he was living in the midst of the most exciting era of the medium's development and he was a born experimenter. While he was no master of the technical aspect of photography, he was an avid snapshotter who liked to capture family and friends in unguarded moments—although he would sometimes aggressively, almost tyrannically, pose them to fit a composition he had imagined. The



Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Paintings Gallery,
circa 1879–80, etching.



From top: *Self-Portrait and Details of Hand and Eye*, circa 1856–57, black chalk on paper; *Marguerite Degas, the Artist's Sister*, circa 1860–62, etching and drypoint.

artist and critic Michael Ayrton (cited by Johnson and co-curator Louise Siddons in the catalogue) has written that Degas “was interested in snapshot photography...and found in the arbitrary pictorial boundaries imposed by the lens a convention which added greatly to the sense of the event with which his pictures are concerned. By his use of this synthetic, visual technique, he created a mode of composition almost without precedent.”

While Johnson is a collector of photography himself—especially found snapshots—he cherishes his Degas photos chiefly for what they say about the man himself. “The addition of photos to the exhibition shows a warm side of Degas,” he says. “We see him taking photos of his friend Claude Debussy on a boating party; we see him off-duty with his sword in his sheath, not the grumpy Parisian persona he worked so hard to build up.” The essential warmth of the private Degas was vividly painted in words by the Symbolist Odilon Redon, whose work Degas admired even if he couldn’t always relate to it: “The main interest in his talk is the rage he exhales against the false and the absurd. I told him how pleasantly surprised I was, in view of his reputation for being a tiger, by his communicative sociability. He said he maintained that legend of ferocity to get people to let him alone.” A pen-and-ink portrait by Redon of the fantastical printmaker Rodolphe Bresdin is in the exhibition, part of Johnson’s attempt to re-create the





From top: Vicomte Lepic, *Moonlit Landscape*, circa 1875, monoprint etching;
Watanabe Seitel, *Landscape With Mount Fuji*, circa 1880.

atmosphere of Degas' own collection of works by his friends and other fellow artists.

For Degas was very much a collector; Johnson calls his "the best artist's collection since Thomas Lawrence's Old Masters." He also likes to point out that "the greatest collector of Degas was Degas," referring to his habit of not offering certain kinds of work for sale or exhibition. Toward the end of his life Degas was even contemplating starting his own museum, to be dedicated to his own work as well as that of the artists he prized, but he changed his mind after being appalled at the bad taste of Gustave Moreau's private museum. In any case, Johnson feels a kinship with Degas in the matter of collecting—like the artist, he is a relatively impecunious collector who seeks out opportunities in out of the way places, is prepared to wait very patiently for what he wants, and doesn't put too much emphasis on condition. He put together his Degas collection by buying works on paper rather than paintings or pastels, going after less popular subject matter (he jokes that at an auction he got a Degas

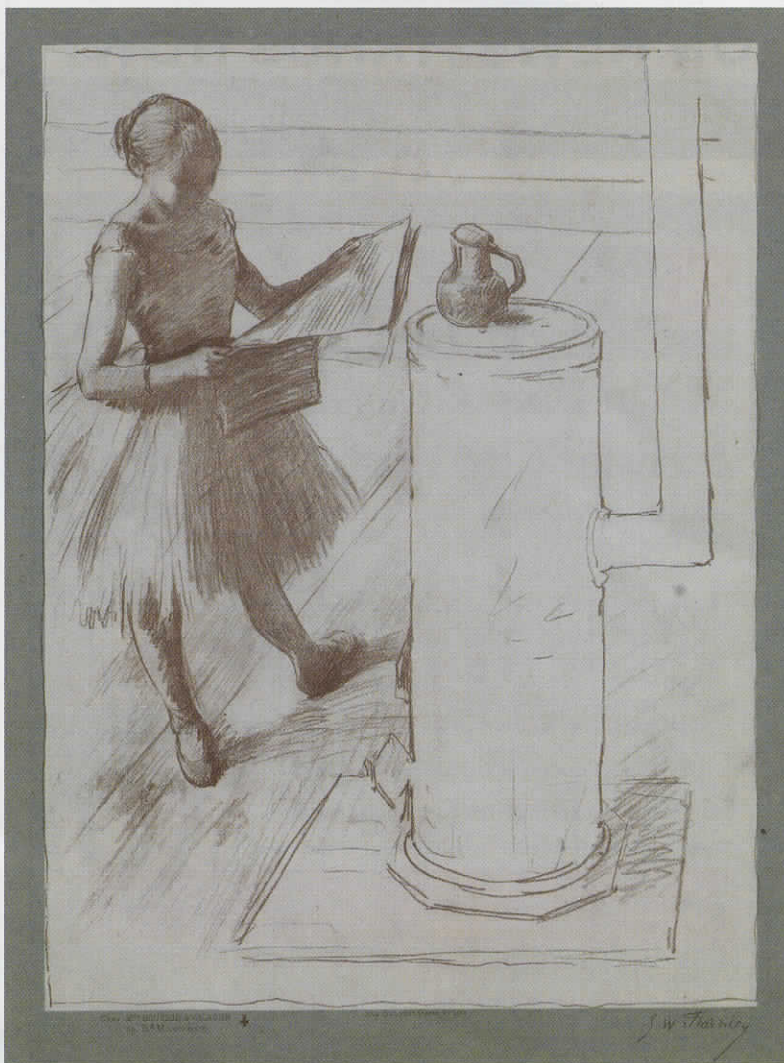
drawing of a plough horse that no one wanted because it wasn't a race horse), and by accepting prints from cancelled plates. The portrait of Cassatt in the Louvre has light cancellation marks going across it; a print of that image without the marks would cost vastly more. "As a scholar," says Johnson, "am I going to give up that image in my collection just because I wasn't able to win the Powerball lottery? I don't make any apologies."

In some cases, he actually values damaged works for the damage: He has an etched portrait of Degas' sister Marguerite in which the woman's face is almost completely obliterated because the artist fussed with the plate through six states, at the last of which he applied too much acid. "He got it to a perfect state, then did a little bit more, screwed it up a bit, then virtually ruined it," says Johnson. "Why would I buy this? I'm a seeker of knowledge. One of reasons I love this print is that it shows how Degas could put salt in the soup till it didn't taste good anymore. He was much more interested in the journey than in the destination."

The beginning of that journey is highlighted at the Met by a smaller but very interesting exhibition, "Rembrandt and Degas: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," on view through May 20. In the 1850s, when Degas was a student, diligently copying at the Louvre (a habit he kept up well into middle age), the art world was rediscovering the etchings of Rembrandt, due mainly to the publication of an affordable, high-quality book of reproductions. Rembrandt was idolized by the young generation for his bold, anticlassical style, uncompromising realism, and technical virtuosity," in the words of the Met's curators.

Degas was particularly captivated by Rembrandt's tiny, intimate etched self-portraits, done when he was in his early 20s, the same age as Degas was when he began modeling his own self-portraits on them. This face-to-face encounter shows Degas looking to the past while looking inside himself, copying but also moving ahead with his own style. The show includes paintings, drawings and prints, mainly self-portraits by both artists but also a copy by Degas from Rembrandt (his 1857 *Young Man in a Velvet Cap*) and a portrait of the printmaker and teacher Joseph Tourny—who introduced him to Rembrandt's work—in the style of Rembrandt.

While Rembrandt's self-portraits helped guarantee his fame, Degas' have never been seen as a key aspect of his work. In part, that has been due to his own desire to keep them out of the public eye. Wishing to remain paradoxically "illustrious and unknown," Degas gave the world a partial view of himself—say, a three-quarter view in shadow. Now, thanks to some innovative curators, we are getting a look at the whole man. ■



From top: Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill*, 1639; Edgar Degas and George William Thornley, *Danseuse près de la poêle*, circa 1888-89, lithograph.