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BY

CIARAN TAYLOR

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INTRODUCTION

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas was born on July 19, 1834 to Auguste Degas, a wealthy banker, half French and half Italian, and to Celestine, nee Musson, a Louisiana Creole of French descent. The family took to calling themselves de Gas (1) about this time, to add the appearance of nobility to their recently acquired wealth. Edgar abandoned this bit of pretentiousness at about the age of thirty, being sufficiently proud of his grand bourgeois background not to need such artificial aggrandisement. It was perhaps partly Degas' upper middle-class background that made him disdain close association with his fellow Impressionists in later life. They mainly came from petit bourgeois backgrounds and were younger than he. Since he was acutely conscious of his status, he probably looked down on them to some extent. His friend Manet was an exception, as he came from a similar background, the son of a rich lawyer, and was two years older than Degas.

Grand bourgeois Degas certainly was: at the age of eleven he was sent to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, the foremost in France, where he received a completely impractical, strictly classical education. It was here that Degas first studied art, for which he showed a great aptitude. After he took his baccalauréat in 1852 he wanted to continue studying art, but his father wanted him to study law. He complied, but soon abandoned the course, and was placed in the studio of Louis Lamothe, a follower of Ingres. Degas, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not find the regime stifling, but enjoyed drawing casts and copying Old Masters; indeed, he carried on copying paintings for the rest of his life.

He stayed with Lamothe for just over a year, and then spent a few months at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1855. After that he was self-taught.

The two most esteemed artists living at this time were Ingres and Delacroix, and their styles were seen as enemy camps, mutually opposed approaches to the making of art, with Ingres as the champion of elegant, classical line, and Delacroix the hero of brilliant, romantic colour. Naturally, having been trained by a disciple of Ingres, Degas' allegiance was initially to the Ingres camp. Perhaps Degas was also influenced by Ingres' character, for brusqueness, aloofness and a fondness for aphorisms were common to them both.

While Degas had a life-long reverence for Ingres, apparent in the delicacy of his line, he came under the influence of Delacroix, especially his colour, at quite an early stage. His work can be seen as an attempt at resolution of the debate between the two camps which succeeds in transcending them, for the tension created by the dialectic between the two tendencies creates great energy and character. One feature which the two masters shared was their esteem for history painting. This was to be an important influence of Degas' early years.

Every year from 1865 to 1870, Degas showed paintings at the official Salon, first a history painting, then portraits, a racing scene and a ballet scene. Perhaps the influence of his friend Manet, whom he met in 1862 had changed him from a history painter into a Realist. He gave up sending work to the Salons after 1870 because, in the crowded and competetive atmosphere, his delicate and personal pictures were not seen to

advantage.

The first Impressionist Exhibition was held in 1874 in the studio of the photographer Nadar. Here Degas was able to arrange for his works to be hung to his satisfaction. He saw that exhibition as a 'Salon of Realists'. (2)

Degas was always somewhat aloof from the other Impressionists and seemed to feel himself an outsider among them; in fact, he seemed almost always to see himself as an outsider. This would account for the independence of his outlook which allowed him to paint with great individualism: observing society without identifying with it, he did not have to accept its norms. That also applied to the Impressionist group, whose norms he never accepted: he never painted in the open air, and as for spontaneity, he said:

> No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament I know nothing. (3)

That he was largely self-taught and loved solitude meant that he was used to being his own arbiter in art-matters. This meant that he investigated materials, techniques, forms and subjects for himself, rather than relying on precedent. This is true to some extent of all great artists, but for Degas it was a principle of operation. His individualism thus determines the character of his art and sets it off from that of his contemporaries. In the following four chapters I discuss some of the areas in which I feel Degas' individualism had its most interesting and important effects on his work.

FOOTNOTES

1. Roy McMullen: Degas, His Life, Times and Work, p. 7ff.
2. Ian Dunlop: Degas, p. 124
3. Ibid., p. 65
4. McMullen, p. 65

CHAPTER ONE: DEGAS' TECHNIQUE

Degas is perhaps most comparable with Leonardo in his continual experimentation with technique. As with everything he did, he was not content to practise what was generally accepted, but had to evolve his own way of doing things, or not so much to evolve as repeatedly to find new solutions to the problems he set himself. Like Leonardo, some of his experimentation led to failures.

He was contemptuous of other artists' acceptance of the limitations of conventional technique, and when he heard of another artist's having "found" his method he remarked: 'Fortunately for me I have not found my method: that would only bore me.'[1]

One of the things that drove Degas to this experimenting was that, like Leonardo, though to a far smaller extent, there was something of the scientist in him. He liked experiment, he delighted in technical terms, in messing about with various materials, in making up formulae. He was infinitely curious about the methods he employed and tremendously enthusiastic about the results he obtained, constantly recommending them to his colleagues. For instance, he recommends a method of tinting etchings using woodblocks and copper stencils to Pissarro in 1880:'One could make some nice experiments with original and unusually coloured prints ... I shall soon send you some of my own attempts of this kind. It would be economical and novel.'[2]

For Degas the studio was something of a laboratory, and a place of seclusion. One of the few outsiders admitted to it,

Paul Valery, describes it as a long attic room with a wide but dirty bay window where light and dust mingled gaily:

> The room was pell-mell with a basin, a dull zinc bath-tub, stale bathrobes, a "danseuse" modelled in wax, with a real gauze tutu, in a glass case, and easels loaded with charcoal sketches of flat-nosed, twisted models, ... A narrow shelf ran under the window where a ghost of sunshine lingered; it was piled with bottles, flasks, pencils, bits of pastel chalk, etching needles and all the nameless odds and ends that may come in handy one day...[3]

Degas' enthusiasm for the technical is clearly reflected in the fact that he would learn the techniques and language of the people he was studying. He was familiar with all the steps of the ballet and the terms for them and likewise with the skills and terms of the laundry-girls. When Edmond de Goncourt visited Degas' studio in 1874 the painter showed him pictures of these women and impressed him by:

> speaking their language, explaining to us in technical terms the <u>applied</u> stroke of the iron, the <u>circular</u> stroke, etc... And it is really very amusing to watch him on the tips of his toes, his arms rounded, combine with the aesthetic of the ballet-master the aesthetic of the painter[4]

This interst in technique for its own sake was quite slow to have its effect on Degas' painting: in the first two decades of his career (mid 1850s to mid 1870s) he restricted himself to the conventional oil-painting technique that he had been trained in by disciples of Ingres, a sober technique of thin flat strokes which preserved smoothness of surface and which Degas admiringly referred to as "<u>le demi-plein mince</u>", literally translated, "the thin half-full".

Surely Degas' greatest achievement was the elevation of pastel, traditionally a minor medium, to the status of a major one by discovering in it a power and versatility that had not previously been explored.

Pastel consists of pure pigment, or a mixture of pigments and chalk bound with gum into a little stick like a chalk crayon. The main problem is that it crumbles very easily and is easily rubbed off the paper or canvas. Degas tried various methods of fixing it to the drawing surface, eventually using the fixative given to him by Luigi Chialiva, whose formula was supposed to be so secret that it could never be duplicated, an aspect of it which must have appealed greatly to Degas.[5] This fixative allowed Degas to use contrasting colours layered on top of one another without each layer disturbing the last. The result was a surface of flickering colours, reminiscent of contemporary landscapes by Monet and Pissarro.

Degas also invented his own manipulations for reworking the pastel once applied. He would arrange kettles so that steam would blow onto the pastel, making it dissolve into a vaporous film, or into a paste that could be reworked with the brush.

It is possible that the impetus for Degas' revival of pastel was the pastels of the eighteent century masters de la Tour and Perronneau in the collections of his father's friends Eudoxe Marcille and Louis LaCaze. However he was inspired to take it up, he mastered the medium as no-one has ever done before or since.

In his early paintings in oils, Degas did not experiment with variations of the standard medium. He did, however, experiment with them in some quite early oil sketches. He painted in oils on previously oiled paper so that the brush would glide easily, 'with ease and delight'[6], as he is supposed to have said. Later he discovered another method of painting smoothly in oil which he used in paintings as well as in sketches.

105. Degas. A Woman on a Sofa. 1878. Oil and pastel on paper.

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He diluted his colours extensively with turpentine, thus soaking the oil out of them (hence the name peinture à l'essence) and applied them to a matt surface on canvas or paper, thus producing a dry chalky effect. Sometimes, especially in drawings and sketches, Degas would combine peinture à l'essence, or pastel, or both, with other media. For instance, the drawing A Woman on a Sofa (Ill. 1) combines peinture à l'essence and pastel on orange-pink paper.

Paintings, too, began to bear the impress of Degas' experiments with mixed media. Dancers in Butterfly Costumes (Ill.2) was first painted entirely in pastel. Then the floor and the stage flat, behind which the dancers are standing, was worked over with a wet brush. The background foliage and the dancers' flowers were then heightened in gouache, thus producing great richness of texture and intensity of colour. The fact that this method of working allowed him to revise his paintings ad infinitum attracted Degas and gave him the stimulus for much of his experimentation with technique. Revising his pictures was something to which Degas was addicted: so much so that in later life he was known to buy his own early pictures at sales so that he could rework them, often to disastrous effect. An example of this is what happened to a pastel which belonged to Degas' friend Henri Rouart whose son Ernest recounts the story:

> Whenever he came upon some more or less early work of his own, he always wanted to get it back on the easel and rework it. Thus, after seeing again and again at our house a delightful pastel my father had bought and was very fond of, Degas was seized with his habitual and imperious urge to retouch it. He would not let the matter

> alone, and in the end my father, from sheer weariness, let him take it away. It was never seen again.
>
> Often my father would as him about his beloved pastel; Degas would put him off in one way or another, but in the end he had to confess his crime: the work entrusted to him for a few retouches had been completely destroyed. (7)

If an infinitely revisable medium was what Degas sought, then he found it in the monotype. This process, originally used as a way of trying out an idea for a lithograph, pleased Degas so much that he used it as an end in itself, and created a large series of monotype, including many on erotic themes.

The technique involves covering a plate uniformly with ink and then wiping some of it away by various means. The ink which remains then forms the picture on a piece of paper which is applied to the plate and put through a press. Since the ink is merely manipulated on a smooth surface, only one good impression is possible: one, or at most two, subsequent impressions can be made, but these are usually quite faint. Thus, while the monotype is a form of print, it cannot produce an edition. It compensates for this by producing half-tones and textures very readily, and, because the ink stays wet for a long time, it can very easily be altered. To produce the greatest possible variety of effects, Degas improvised constantly, using not only the standard rag or brush, but also various pointed or blunt instruments, including his fingers.

Since monotype does not permit fine detail, it encourages the use of masses of light and dark, and the textured half-tones this medium produces so readily; hence Degas' use of it to depict the half-lit worlds of stage and brothel. As well as producing

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such delicate and witty masterpieces as Woman at her toilet in a brothel (Ill. 3), where the richness of texture Degas aimed at can be clearly seen, he also conceived of the idea of using monotype as a basis for pastel. Not only did he use the first impression, but he took advantage of the second, fainter impression to give him the opportunity of making a second pastel in which he could vary the colouring and treatment of the first. Very many of his pastels are painted over monotypes.

In 1890 he did a series of colour monotypes, using oil-paint instead of printing ink. Oddly, for Degas, the subject was landscape, based on his memory of what he had seen from the window of his carriage during a four day journey through Burgundy. These, too, were worked over in pastel to produce misty vaporous vague shapes, one veil of colour floating over another. While they have achieved some critical acclaim, they are his least well-known pictures, possibly merely because they are not typical of his work: unfortunately Degas' individualism and independent-mindedness do not suffice to gain them public acceptance.

Degas was too individualistic to accept what was normally taken for granted, even, as we have just seen, the range of subject-matter he had established for himself. In the realm of technique this meant that he was not content to use techniques in the manner in which they had been handed down from master to pupil, but constantly experimented with them , to press new things from them, and to make them answer his needs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Theodore Reff: Degas, The Artist's Mind, p. 270

2. Ibid., p. 271

3. Dunlop: p. 160

4. Ibid., p. 108

5. Recent research suggests that this fixative was simply white shellac dissolved in methyl alcohol, and so could easily have been duplicated. See Dunlop, p. 160 and note 50.

6. Reff, op. cit., p. 277

7. Dunlop, p. 124

CHAPTER TWO: DEGAS' COMPOSITION

Degas' compositions are probably where he shows his greatest inventiveness, daring and virtuosity, where the greatest fruit of his individuality is borne, and, indeed, it is here that we find him at his most individual. He may have been influenced by Japanese prints or by photography in the way he composed his paintings, but they led him to something utterly original.

A striking example of a totally unorthodox Degas composition is the pastel Dancers Resting (Ill. 4). Most powerful here is the orange bench on which the central dancer is sitting. This orange stripe dominates the painting and has a strong abstract effect, yet also pushes powerfully into the picture. This vigorous movement is balanced partly by the dancer sitting on it, the angle of whose body reflects its movement towards the top right corner, and, more importantly, by the static dejected-looking figure of the dancer at the left. The line across the top of the painting suggests most economically the space in which the dancers are sitting, and contains the movement of the painting.

The point of view which has given us these strong abstract movements is an unusual one. As so often with Degas, he seems to have adopted a high viewpoint so that his subjects are spread out vertically across the picture as they recede, rather than being concentrated in one horizontal band. This method of indicating distance was also used by the Japanese, but is here employed by Degas not so much to suggest distance (his use of linear perspective does that) but for its compositional implications: bizarre juxtapositions and the tendency to make his pictures more flattened and abstract.

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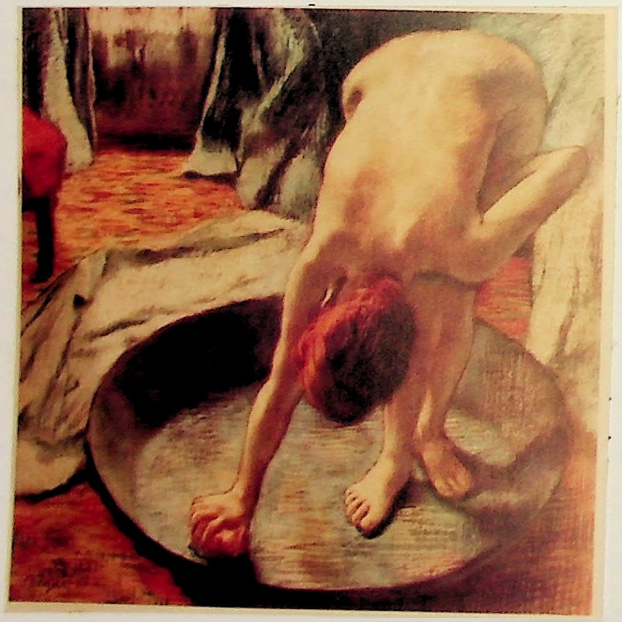

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In a notebook, Degas tells us how he organised drawing from such a viewpoint: 'Set up platforms all around the room , to get used to drawing from above and below... Have the model pose on the ground level and work on the first level'. (1) Notice that although he mentions drawing from below as well as above, he later seems to give preference to drawing from above, as he was to do ever after.

The elevated viewpoint features again in the famous pastel The Tub of c. 1885-6 (Ill. 5). It allows Degas to produce a startlingly original composition. First of all, consider the pose, totally new in life-painting. We see the torso upside-down, lower back at the top, head at the bottom, and then, most incongruously, we see the feet just below the head. This strange pose helps heighten our awareness of the body as an abstract element in the composition. The verticality of the body is counterpointed by the horizontal ellipse of the tub, the shape of which we are allowed to see, again because of the high viewpoint. The picture is split tonally in half: the upper half light, with telling dark accents, and the lower half dark, with light accents. Notice the chairleg protuding into the picture at the upper left: this suggests the rest of the space around the bathing model, indicates where the floor level is (important from this disorienting viewpoint) and ties up the composition neatly.

In another example of his great inventiveness, Degas seats us in the front row at the ballet in The Orchestra at the Opera, 1868-9 (Ill. 6). This picture is vigorously divided up by a Z-shaped zigzag. This is formed by the red velvet top of the

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rail dividing us from the orchestra; the line of the bassoon, and its continuation in the shoulder of the double-bass player; and the line of the top of the footlights. The faces of the musicians, intensely characterised portraits of people Degas probably knew quite well, are all concentrated into the triangle formed by the bassoon-line and the footlights. At the apex of this triangle is the head of the double-bass player who is looking away from us rather than being in profile like the other players. Unlike the others, too, his head crosses the line of the footlights as does the peg-box of his instrument. By doing this, his head leads us into the stage area, and also pushes it back. The peg-box also does both of these things, but because of its highly decorative shape it seems to want to join in with the dancers as well. The dancers have been reduced to more abstract shapes by having their feet cut off by the footlights and their heads by the edge of the picture: their seemingly disembodied arms and legs flit about against the brilliant colours of their dresses like quavers on a stave.

With his original approach Degas breaks the conventions of painting (the musicians are all looking at something beyond the side of the picture which we cannot see, the dancers' heads and feet are obscured) but by doing so creates a great impression of naturalness and immediacy.

In a painting like Jockeys before the start with flagpole, c. 1891 (Ill. 7), the Japanese influence on Degas is at its most obvious (the featuresof the jockey on the right even look rather oriental). No French painter before Degas had ever used a composition like this. Its most aggressively unorthodox feature is the flagpole,

the nearest object to us, which divides the picture vertically into two unequal parts. This pushes everything back and makes us feel cut off from the action in the picture, conscious of ourselves as observers. Another unorthodox feature is the off-centre character of the composition: the three horses and jockeys are all crammed into one small area on the right of the painting, while the rest has only the simplest indications of land and sky.

The low, watery sun, a decorative element reminiscent of oriental art, creates a gentle counterpoint to the charged energy of the opposite corner. As so often with Degas, the viewpointis an elevated one, a little above the level of the horses' backs. This also raises the horizon line, so that a great part is taken up with open ground, which is used as an important compositional element. The viewpoint also allows the tiny distant horse to be at the same level as the near horse's head, which is the larger of the two: an amusing contrast.

Rather than repeat stale, familiar, balanced compositions, Degas saw how unorthodox and very individual compositions would allow him to paint more interesting paintings which were characteristic of him and his individuality. As we have seen, he used many unusual compositional devices which give his pictures the appearance of being a radically new way of seeing, as indeed they are. He experiments with composition as an end in itself, as the counterpoint of decorative elements, as, for example, in Dancers Resting; an abstract painting which does not sacrifice naturalism.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peff, op. cit., p. 245

CHAPTER THREE: DEGAS' SCULPTURE

Degas, as well as being one of the most individual of painters, was also a profoundly original sculptor. Despite the fact that a large proportion of his energies went into the production of sculpture, this oeuvre is not very well known. This is because Degas only exhibited one sculpture in his lifetime, and he took no precautions to ensure the preservation of fragile works in clay or wax once he had finished them. Some indication of the proportion of work surviving to Degas' total output is given in a letter from his dealer and friend, Joseph Durand-Ruel, to an art critic on June 7, 1919:

> It is quite correct that Degas has spent a good deal of time, not only in the later years of his life, but for the last thirty years, modelling in clay. Thus, as far as I can remember, that is to say, perhaps forty years, whenever I called on Degas, I was almost as sure to find him modelling in clay as painting. Degas must have made an enormous number of clay and wax figures, but as he never took care of them - he never had them put in bronze - they always fell to pieces after a few years, and for that reason it is only the later ones that now exist.
>
> When I made the inventory of Degas' possessions, I found about 150 pieces scattered over his three floors in every possible place. Most of them were in pieces, some almost reduced to dust. We put apart all those that we thought might be seen, which was about one hundred, and we made an inventory of them. Out of these, thirty are about valueless; thirty badly broken up and very sketchy; the remaining thirty are quite fine. (1)

Thus we are left with the conclusion that after Degas' death only a small proportion of his sculptural output, which must have numbered several hundreds, was left intact, and of that, only the pieces in better condition were preserved. What is left is only conjecturally dateable, since Degas never sold any of it, and

only exhibited one piece: but it can be taken that it is the development of a large amount of earlier work, now lost. The loss of so much of Degas' sculpture is a tragedy, given the individuality and originality of what remains.

Among the earliest of the surviving sculptures, and probably the best known of them, is the one sculpture Degas exhibited, the clothed version of the Little Dancer of Fourteen Years (Ill. 8). It was shown in the spring of 1881 at the sixth Impressionist exhibition. In the opening days of the exhibition it was only represented by preparatory sketches, but when the piece itself finally appeared, it caused a sensation. It was a two-thirds life-size figure in wax, painted in lifelike colours, and dressed in a real linen bodice, gauze tutu and satin slippers, and with real hair tied up with a green silk ribbon.

Huysmans, ever sympathetic to Degas, was impressed:

> The terrible reality of this little statue produces an evident unease in him; all those ideas about sculpture, those cold inanimate whitenesses, those memorable stereotypes copied again and again for centuries, are upset. The fact is that, with his first blow, M. Degas has up-ended the traditions of sculpture as he has long been shaking the conventions of painting. (2)

Other influential critics were also sympathetic. Nina de Villars concluded a warm review for the Courrier du Soir by saying:

> Around me they said: it's a doll. How difficult it is to accustom the public to look without anger at something it has not already seen the day before.
>
> But let the artist be reassured: the work that is misunderstood today will one day perhaps be in a museum looked upon with respect as the first formulation of a new art. (3)

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Degas also impressed his fellow artists: Whistler is reported to have been seen, carrying a bamboo mahl-stick by way of a cane, uttering sharp cries and gesticulating in front of the case which enclosed the wax figure. Renoir told Cassatt that Degas was a 'a sculptor capable of rivalling the ancients', and said to his son, 'after Chartres I see but one sculptor ... it's Degas.' (4)

To the public it seems to have been very disturbing: Huysmans describes them fleeing 'very bewildered and as though embarassed.' (5) Some of the critics, likewise, suggested that it should be placed in a museum of anthropology or of pathology, rather than of art. Paul Gentz, a former Director-General of Fine Arts, was outraged by 'the instinctive ugliness of a face on which all the vices imprint their detestable promises'. (6) "Penetrating", "strangely attractive", "vicious", "revealing intimate charms", "frightfully ugly" (7) : these were all terms used by critics who were shocked by the work, and were unable to follow Degas in his overturning of sculptural tradition.

From sculpture they expected the heroic, the bombastic, the classical, the nude (or classical drapery), the mock-antique, the rhetorical and the boring. Degas gave them a little piece of everyday life, an ugly little opera rat, thrusting herself forward that she might be noticed among the crowd of her fellows. Her angular, flattened features and heavy lids betray her Belgian origin (the model is known to be one Marie van Goethem (8)) and are reminiscent of portraits by Rogier van der Weyden. Degas is here bringing to sculpture the realism which inspired so much of his contemporary work: the brothels, the cafes and the laundries. The intense realism of this little figure with its real clothes and natural appearance, with the knowing look beyond her years, was too shocking for those who could not sympathise with Degas' 'modernising'

of sculpture and for whom his individual approach, clashing with all the conventions, was too strange and disturbing to understand. The concentrated doll-like appearance of the less than life-size figure gives it a surrealistic quality which must have added to its disturbing effect on its first audience.

Degas must have been pleased: he had received detailed and sympathetic reviews from influential critics, admiration from his colleagues, and had caused dismay among more reactionary circles, which is what he would have wanted. He was certainly sufficiently encouraged to make more sculpture.

About this time Degas made another anti-heroic, realistic figure, The Schoolgirl. (III, 9) It is also a clothed adolescent girl, like the Little Dancer, but a very much smaller figure, about 10 inches high, and with the clothes part of the modelling rather than real ones. She is walking, carrying a small bag in one hand, and holding her pigtail behind her back with the other. The tilt of the head gives it the same awkward assertiveness as the Little Dancer, and the pose echoes that of the larger piece in many ways: in fact this piece may be what suggested the clothing of the Little Dancer, which was originally envisaged unclothed.

Clothed adolescent figures in an everyday situation appear again in The Apple Pickers, the only relief that Degas is known to have modelled. The original of this work, which Renoir described as being 'as handsome as the antique' (9) has unfortunately not survived: it is preserved only as a small, and rather rough, wax replica. The original was rather large (the figures are reputed to have been half life-size) and in clay. Degas abandoned it, meaning to take it up again, something which he often did, especially with sculpture. He eventually gave up keeping the

clay moist, and it crumbled into dust.

Except for the outdoor setting, The Apple Pickers, so far as it can be made out from sketches and the replica, was strongly reminiscent of a Degas painting, with five figures of children in natural unstudied poses with a strong triangular composition. At the apex a little boy is climbing a tree. To his right, the central figure is eating an apple. To her right two little girls are playing. At the left a child holds out an apple. This humble, gentle work can be compared with Rude's rhetorical reliefs for the Arc de Triomphe. Degas' conception of sculpture is profoundly individual, and yet terribly simple: to apply the same vision which shaped his paintings i.e. a poetry of everyday life which rings truer than any rhetoric of heroic deeds.

The rest of Degas' sculpture treats the same themes which he explored continually in his painting: bathers, dancers and horses. However, Degas did not explore them in what might be thought of as a painterly manner, that is, he did not confine himself to the bas-relief or to the tableau, intended to be seen purely frontally, as many nineteenth century sculptors did, rather, he addressed himself to the problems of pure sculpture in a way that put his work at the forefront of sculptural development. The problems which interested him seem to have been movement, the involvement of the work with its surrounding space, and its relationship to the ground. Nevertheless, they could be said to relate to problems which interested him in painting. The same techtonic genius which produced striking compositions in his paintings was taxed even further to produce the exquisite arrangement of twisting and turning limbs which lead the viewer around the sculpture. Natural yet striking poses suggesting movement were a major concern of his painting, and find even further development in his sculpture. Despite its great intellectual rigour, Degas' sculpture has a charm which eludes most nineteenth century sculpture

for in place of studied rhetoric he brings to it a grace and naturalism that makes it breathe.

Degas' sculptural interests are readily apparent in the Little Dancer, one of his earliest surviving works. Even the simple verticality of a standing pose in its relationship to the ground is complicated by the backward lean of the body and the forward thrust (along the same line) of the right leg, which give the whole piece a lateral thrust. There is no preferred viewpoint: each is incomplete, unstable, and leads on to the next, a dynamic fuelled by the various twists of the legs and arms with respect to the torso, each turned differently. Their competing demands mean that no one view is satisfadtory on its own: the work demands to be seen from all sides. It takes possession of the space around it which can be felt fowing through the loop of the arms, between them and the back, and between the legs. As it is viewed from all sides there is a graceful flow of negative spaces around. Those empty areas which Degas employed so vigorously in his paintings are now heightened into something like melody or dance as they develop in time through the movement of the viewer, opening and closing, continuously changing and heightenig the viewer's experience of space as they do so.

Not only does the form of Degas' sculpture relate to that of his painting, but the subject is invariably one which he has already treated in painting. Horses frequently appear in his early sculpture, as they do in his painting. That Degas should have chosen to do animal sculpture is interesting, as a tradition of animal sculpture had developed in nineteenth century France, possibly as ameans of escaping the confines of academicism.

Degas' earliest horses clearly echo the traditional, slightly stylised walking horses of classical and renaissance equestrian sculpture.

As he went on, however, Degas tried to increase the spatial interest of his horses, putting them in more dynamic poses, and, at the same time, more realistic ones which were suggested, to some extent, by Muybridge's photographs of horses in motion (10). Unlike Muybridge's photographs, Degas' sculptures do not represent a frozen instant of time, but attain a certain unstable equilibrium which suggests both the antecedent and consequent moments of action, creating the impression of a continuity of movement rather than the immobility of the instantaneous photograph.

That Degas was trying to produce the effect of a gesture in progress through the successive views of a sculpture, rather than the effect of one instant chosen from all those that make up the gesture, is clearly shown by Walter Sickert's report that Degas once projected (Ill. 10)
Grand Arabesque against a sheet by the light of a candle, rotating it slowly as he did so (11). Renoir believed this to be Degas' greatest achievement:

> Degas found the means to express the malady of our contemporaries: I mean movement.... Before him only the Chinese had found the secret of movement. That is Degas' greatness: movement in a French style. (12)

Degas' interest in movement led him to abandon the horse in favour of the dancer. This was because of the inherent limitations of the horse's body which cannot twist and bend as the human body can, nor are the same sorts of relationships of twists and angles between the limbs possible. The one advantage of the horse, from Degas' point of view, was that it was a horizontal mass partially freed from its relationship to the ground by being connected to it only by spindly legs; rather than the rigidly vertical form thoroughly wedded to the plinth which was the staple of academic sculpture.

Degas' individualism meant that he was not at all swayed by the

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simple verticality and planarity of salon sculpture: as ever, he found his own way, and transcended what had been taken for granted to produce something far more original, ambitious and inspired than sculpture had been in the previous hundred years. Indeed, he began his experiments with the human figure by using a dancer in a pose that bears a similarity to his horses - a horizontal mass floating above the ground with a delicate support. The dancer performs an arabesque, standing on one leg, holding her body and other leg parallel to the ground. In the earliest examples, she holds her arms parallel to her body, and the result is a very simple planar form whose prime view is its profile. Gradually, Degas increased the spatial interest of this form by the most ingeniously subtle means. The foot on the ground turns outward, and the raised foot turns to the side, producing the sense of a circling motion, aided by the arms, now thrown outward and bent, so that the viewer is irresistibly drawn into circling, and circles the little figure.

Degas' standing figures are not so obviously freed from the base as the figures performing an arabesque and floating effortlessly on one leg only, and yet by the use of the same sort of rising, circling movement, he developed in these, too, a certain levitation. An early example of this is the Little Dancer, the extreme turns of whose feet initiate the characteristic circling movement. In later work the arms are thrown out and curve around the body, reinforcing the movement begun by the feet. This process culminates in The Spanish Dancer (Ill.11), one of very few figures which Degas had cast during his lifetime, and thus presumably, one of which he thought highly. In the work the right leg arches sharply away from the body in a somewhat spiral form which continues in the torso, its hips cocked toward the supporting left leg, around in the curving left arm and the turn of the head, up through

the raised right arm, and finally arching back to the head through the lowered right hand. All these counterposed twists and turns create a complex spatial interplay which is equally satisfactory from every point of view, doing away with any sense of frontality. Millard says of it that it 'is a sculptural statement of sophistication unrivalled in the nineteenth century'. (13)

It is baffling, even with this highly individualistic man, that when his sculpture reached so high a pitch of achievement, he nevertheless made little attempt to exhibit it or even preserve it. The reason is certainly not that he disregarded it, for then he would hardly have devoted so much time and effort to it. Perhaps he felt it was before its time, which is certainly true. Degas' approach was thoroughly modern: he approached sculpting the human figure in a totally abstract way, seeing it as a structure of which he sought new and sculpturally interesting configurations, and not simultaneously grinding any emotional or rhetorical axes. He was alone in conceiving the desirability of working with such an aim, and at a time when Rodin, the sculptural avant-garde, was working in an emotional and literary manner which had its roots firmly in nineteenth century romanticism. For these reasons it is Degas rather than Rodin who deserves the title of 'first modernist sculptor'.

FOOTNOTES

1. Charles W. Millard: The Sculpture of Edgar Degas, p. 25f.
2. Dunlop, p. 179
3. Millard, p. 28
4. Ibid., p. 29
5. Ibid., p. 123
6. Reff, op. cit., p. 243
7. Ibid.
8. Millard, p. 100f.
9. Reff, op. cit., p. 249
10. Millard, p. 100f.
11. Ibid., p. 105
12. Ibid., p. 110
13. Ibid., p. 103

CHAPTER FOUR: DEGAS AND WOMEN

Degas' individualism had important repercussions, not only on the media and form of his work, but also on his subjects and his attitude towards them. In the case of women, despite his reputation for misogyny, he was in many ways free of the common prejudices which prevented many of his colleagues from seeing women simply as other people.

Degas' paintings of bathers, such as The Tub (Ill. 5), were first exhibited in the 8th Impressionist exhibition of 1886 to a mixture of acclaim and horror. Degas has taken his searching look at everyday life into the bedroom to show the humdrum but secret ritual of washing, and to resurrect the time honoured subject of the nude in a revitalized form. Many of the first viewers of these paintings could see nothing but ugliness in them. They were not what they expected of nudes: deliberately not. They were not idealised goddesses, but ordinary women who were not particularly beautiful. They were not posed in a conventional graceful attitude, displaying their charms to the viewer, but in the often awkward postures dictated by bathing and with no deference to the sexual appetites of the (male) viewer. As Degas put it:

> Hitherto the nude has always been represented in poses which presuppose an audience, but my women are simple, straightforward women, concerned with nothing beyond their physical existence. Just look at this one: she is washing her feet. (1)

Hitherto, also, the nude had been highly idealised and presented in an aura of quasi-divinity, or exoticism, or both. What motive could Degas have had for taking her from her pedestal?

To J.K. Huysmans the answer was obvious. Degas had substituted

'real, living denuded flesh' for 'the smooth and slippery flesh of ever nude goddesses' to 'humiliate' and 'debase' his subjects. Degas had 'brought an attentive cruelty and a patient hatred to bear upon his studies of nudes'. (2) This sort of assessement, with Huysmans as its locus classicus, had been repeated routinely ever since. Dunlop, for instance, tells that Degas 'seems to have been frightened of women'. (3)

Surely the first viewers of Degas' bathers were reacting to the newness of vision he brought to these paintings, the freshness of vision so characteristic of him. They were unable, or unwilling, however, to accept the terms of this vision. This new vision involved seeing women realistically as people in society rather than ignoring the person totally, and inventing an imaginary goddess as a vehicle for male desire. The source of Degas' new way of seeing women was his deep understanding of human psychology, and it is given power by the subtle means he used to communicate this understanding. Degas' innovation was to treat women no differently from men, that is, he treated all his human subjects as individuals and not as stereotypes or idealisations.

Degas' psychological penetration is already apparent in such an early picture as The Bellelli Family (Ill. 12), begun when Degas was twenty-five. In this chilling painting we do not find the composed, bourgeois stability we might expect of a nineteenth century family portrait, but rather a highly charged graph of the tensions and pressures within this family. It is the testimony of Degas' sojourn with his aunt Laura's family for nine months in Florence. During this time he must have been acutely sensitive to the alienation of the parents and the feelings of their children. Degas communicates the strained relations within the family very

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simply and very forcefully, carefully avoiding any rhetoric. His uncle is obviously isolated from the rest of the family: he has his back to us and is separated from the other figures. His aunt is a stronger figure who has the support of her two daughters, but she is also more poignant. She is in mourning for her recently deceased father (a portrait of him is on the wall behind her), and she is pregnant with a third child. While she is unhappy but resolute, her husband seems vague and unfeeling, yet tragic in his isolation. One of the daughters seems to identify completely with her mother, as she stands close by her and in a similar pose. The other, the most striking figure in the painting with her left leg drawn partly up under her skirt, is placed closer to her mother but seems also to be drawn to her father, as she turns towards him. Perhaps this is the quandary in which Degas found himself, for he concentrates the viewer's attention on her by placing her at the centre of the picture and by focusing several lines on her, such as the diagonal running from lower left to upper right, and the line of her mother's left arm. We identify with her, the confused child caught between the sides in an adult war she does not understand. Degas does not pass judgement, he does not decide for either of them, he merely portrays their anguish for us.

The painting known either as The Banker or Sulking (Ill. 13), painted seventeen years later, is another evocation of quiet domestic pain. That the couple are well known to each other is apparent from the informality of their poses: perhaps they are husband and wife, or father and daughter. That they are not on the best of terms is apparent. The man turns away, sunk in morose thought, while the woman looks glumly up to the viewer for support. Degas reaffirms the relationship between them by including

both their heads within the frame of the English racing print on the wall behind them (4). We cannot tell the reason for their estrangement, but again Degas, with his acute grasp of psychology, has conveyed it both deftly and surely.

Although Degas' psychological acumen allowed him to depict the inner life of men as well as women, he became especially interested in investigating the everyday life of women, possibly because this was a new subject, peculiar to himself. He treats women with an insight and sympathy which enables him to produce a new vision of them in painting: women as autonomous people rather than as pretty, desriable objects of potential ownership. As Dunlop puts it:

> Degas' paintings and drawings of the 1870s show a greater awareness ofthe reality of womens's lives and ambitions than that of any artist of his time. Womanizers like Manet and Renoir, for example, could not help glamourizing their models, drawing attention to their physical charms rather than to their social position. Degas observed them with a colder eye, getting nearer to the truth, showing them using their physical gifts to earn a living - working in the laundry, working at the Opera, working as singers in the cafes, or working in a brothel.(5)

In his many paintings of laundry women and dancers, Degas' concern is often to convey their feelings as working people, hence the similarities which often exist between these two sets of paintings. Laundry-women Ironing (Ill. 14) and Two Ballet Girls (Ill. 15) both convey exhaustion. In the former, one woman throws all her weight onto her iron in a gesture which says that she is so tired that she has to use all her strength just to carry on working. The other woman yawns and stretches, not lazily, but wearily, and leans on her bottle of sprinkling water for support. The bizarre shapes of folded shirts make an amusing foreground object.

In Two Ballet Girls the two figures are bent over with

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tiredness, trying to ease the pain in limbs they have been stretching too hard for hours. One of the faces cannot be seen, and the other is too sketchily rendered to convey any feeling. Their poses reveal their feelings completely, however, and the physically demanding nature of the ballet is forcefully communicated. It is interesting that while Degas so frequently painted the ballet, a subject that tends to suggest empty prettiness, this was a trap into which he rarely fell.

In Degas' paintings of launderers and dancers, these women go about their business, absorbed and unselfconscious, and certainly not pandering to a male observer. The monotypes of brothel scenes are quite different, however. It is in the nature of their work that these women adopt unnatural sexual roles and become somewhat dehumanised. For this reason Degas often portrays them as being animal-like, crouching and scratching as in Repose (Ill. 16). More often he ridicules the whole situation, as in The Client (Ill. 17). His treatment is matter-of-fact and does not attempt to disguise the inherent depravity and squalor of the situation. The approach is humorous rather than moralising, however: he criticises but does not pass judgement.

Thus, Degas portrayed women in the same sympathetic but totally unflattering manner as he did men. If compared with glamororous portraits of women, and considered under their criteria, namely that women should be charming, 'feminine', and unthreatening, then Degas' portraits are tantamount to an insult: they assert none of the desired qualities in the sitter. They do not flatter. If the nineteenth century ideal of woman is accepted, then it is obvious that Degas must feel some animosity towards women to portray them thus. This is the reasoning that made nineteenth

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century critics interpret Degas' work as misogynistic. This reasoning, which is itself misogynistic, totally misconstrues Degas. He was simply ahead of his time in seeing that women were as likely to possess other qualities such as intelligence and dedication which were hitherto perceived as essentially masculine. Thus it is appropriate that his closest female friend should have been Mary Cassatt, a very independent American woman who chose not to let any family ties interfere with her life as an artist, and remained unmarried all her life. She seems to have been as difficult and exacting a friend as Degas himself. The American critic Forbes Watson wrote:

> She had to the end a sense of elegance that encompassed her art and her living. Yet from no lips have I heard less ingratiating language when her passionately-held artistic beliefs were threatened... Her fierce love of truth ... made it impossible for her to say a gracious word to the conniving or to flatter the painter who had been untrue to himself ... And upon stupid visitors who came to see her from idle curiosity, she could exercise a bitter tongue. (6)

Despite her independence, however, she is a good example of how difficult it was, even for a woman as independently-minded as she, to break free of the prejudices that made Degas' treatment of women so shocking to his contemporaries.

In the early 1880s Degas painted a portrait of Cassatt (Ill. 18). The picture completely lacks conventional grace or charm, but establishes Cassatt as a thoughtful woman of strong character. She is seen from an odd angle - from above and to one side - and does not acknowledge our look, but looks pensively outward, having raised from some picture-cards fanned out in her hands. The whole is treated quite summarily, and there is no attempt to make her appear conventionally pretty. Despite the brisk handling of the

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picture, however, we are left with a strong impression of the character of Cassatt. Later in life Mary Cassatt grew to dislike this portrait, and wrote in 1912:

> I don't want to leave this portrait by Degas to my family as one of me. It has some qualities as a work of art but it is so painful and represents me as such a repugnant person that I would not want anyone to know that I posed for it. (7)

Cassatt's dislike of this picture is easily understood if we look at her contemporary self-portrait to see what she wanted of a portrait of herself. Like Degas' portrait this is informal in pose, but it is more tightly handled. She appears prettier, more conventionally 'feminine' and far less assertive of her own personality: in other words, she fits herself into the stereotypical mould of the charming, unthreatening woman. If a woman like Cassatt, with her suffragist leanings, still felt the need to hide in the 'feminine' stereotype, how much less surprising is the reaction of male critics in imputing misogyny to Degas.

In his relationships with women, too, Degas was unconventional. Far from being misogynistic, he showed his deep sympathy for women. His unconventionality lies in the terms on which he wished to relate to women: that is, rather than wishing to court them in the then conventional manner, his interest was solely in a relationship operating on terms of intellectual equality. In short, he wanted to talk to them as friends and colleagues rather than to flirt with them.

For this reason he took a special interest in women who were fellow artists: his friendship with Mary Cassatt has already been mentioned. In a letter to his friend the Count Lepic, Degas describes her as 'a good painter, at this moment engrossed in the study of reflection and shadow of flesh or dresses, for which she

has the greatest affection and understanding'. (8)

Contrast this with Manet's comments on the Morisot sisters in a letter to Fantin-Latour of 1868:

> I agree with you, the demoiselles Morisot are charming. What a pity they aren't men. Still, as women, they might be able to serve the cause of painting by each of them marrying an academician and sowing discord in the camp of those old dotards. (9)

Degas is capable of looking at Cassatt's work sympathetically, and of taking her seriously as a fellow-artist, whereas Manet cannot see a woman as an artist as being much beyond a joke. He does not seem to think that a woman could serve 'the cause of painting' by painting. If we compare a portrait of Berthe Morisot by Manet, entitled Le Repos (Ill. 20), and compare it with Degas' portrait of Cassatt, then it is easy to see that Manet's painting conveys none of the vigorous intelligence suggested by Degas. The fact that Degas' attitude to women is quite at odds with that of his time is made plain in his painting.

Degas first came across Cassatt's work in the Salon and invited her to show with the Impressionists, and, as a result of his encouragement, they became close friends. Other female artists who were encouraged by Degas were Marie Bracquemond, wife of Felix, the engraver, who also showed with the Impressionists; and in Degas' later years Suzanne Valadon came to his attention, and was admonished to 'think of nothing but work, of utilising the rare talent I am proud to see in you.' (10)

Degas did not get along with Berthe Morisot, as she was conventionally-minded, and expected to be courted rather than to be drawn into discussions. Degas mocked her, Morisot reported, by 'pretending that he was going to court me, but this courting was confined to a long commentary on Solomon's

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proverb, "'Woman is the desolation of the righteous"'. (11) This exchange reveals just how far removed Degas' attitude to the conventional female social posture of the time was from Morisot's and society's in general.

Degas and Morisot saw each other frequently, and Morisot admired Degas. Degas' attitude is less clear: while he is reported to have said of her that 'she made pictures the way one would make hats', he also said that behind 'her rather airy painting is hidden a most assured drawing.' (12) The most definite mark of respect for her work on Degas' part was that in 1896 he undertook the sad task of helping her husband and daughter to organise a posthumous exhibition of her work.

What then was Degas' attitude to women? Not misogyny, surely, but, as usual, a determinedly individual stance. He treated women as people, and took them on their own merits, rather than adopting the empty social conventions of the day. Those who could converse intelligently with him he took up as friends. Those who could not, he did not take seriously.

He seems to have felt a deep sympathy with women and to have identified with them more than his contemporaries in his scenes of women's everyday lives, at work or choosing hats. The aloofness which kept him apart from all the world also seems to have kept him from marrying. Perhaps he was afraid of losing his independence. If he lost his position as an outsider, then his individualism would also be in jeopardy. To Degas, the greatest individualist of his time, the happiness of marriage, for which he often expressed a longing, could not be sufficient compensation for the loss of the vital ingredient of his art.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dunlop, p. 188
2. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, Feminism and Art History, p. 247
3. Dunlop, p. 72
4. Reff, p. 117
5. Dunlop, p. 140
6. Ibid., p. 168
7. Broude and Garrard, p. 262
8. Nancy Mowll Mathews: Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters, p. 148
9. Broude and Garrard, p. 261
10. Ibid., p.260
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

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