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ASPECTS OF REALISM IN DEGAS'S WORK

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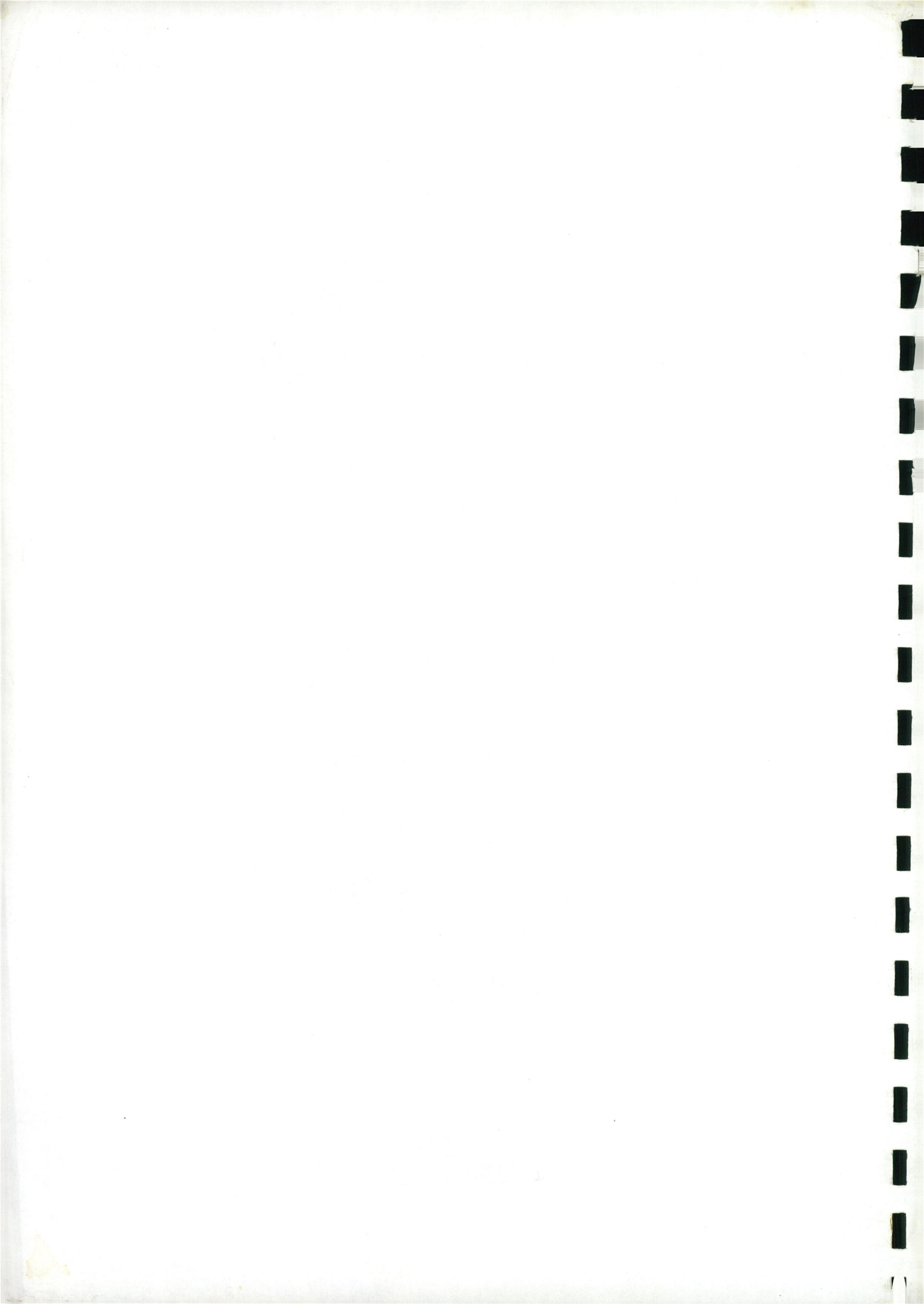


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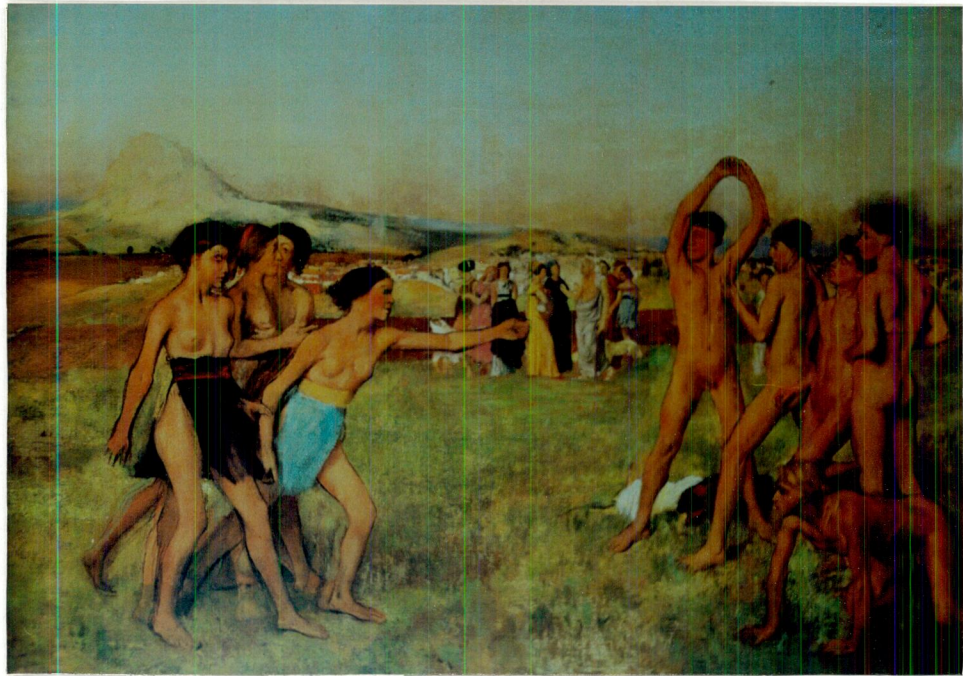


Fig:(1)





Fig (2)



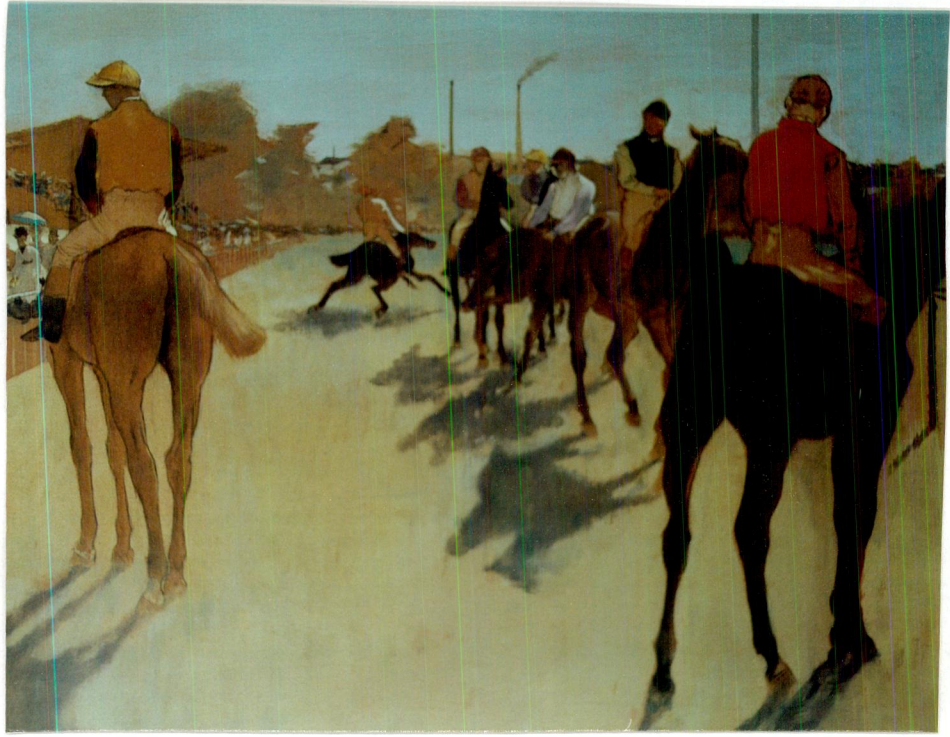
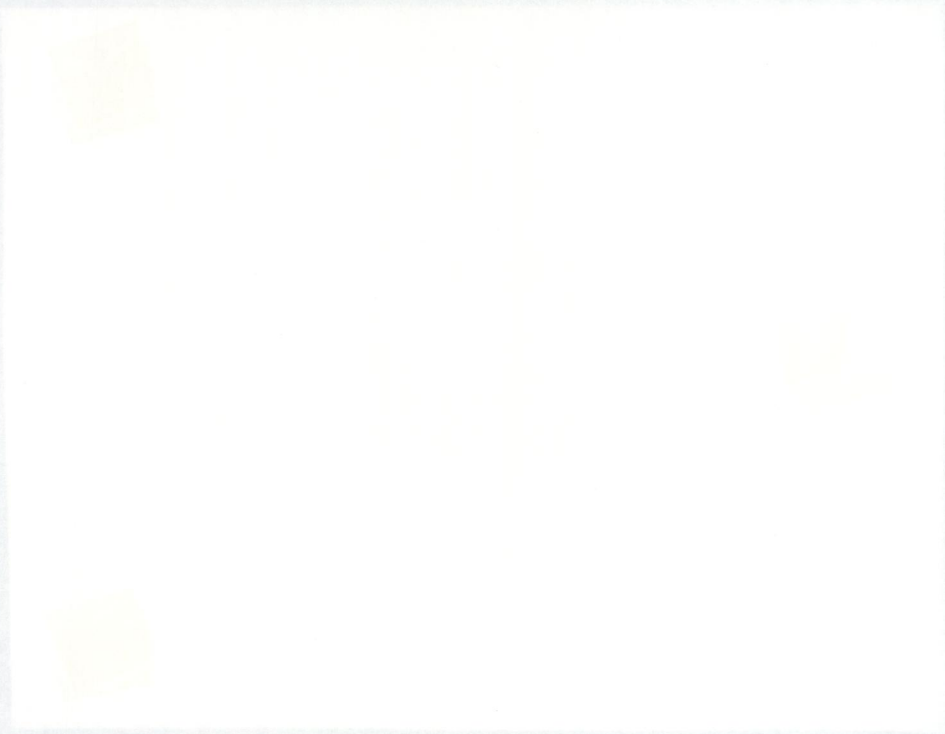
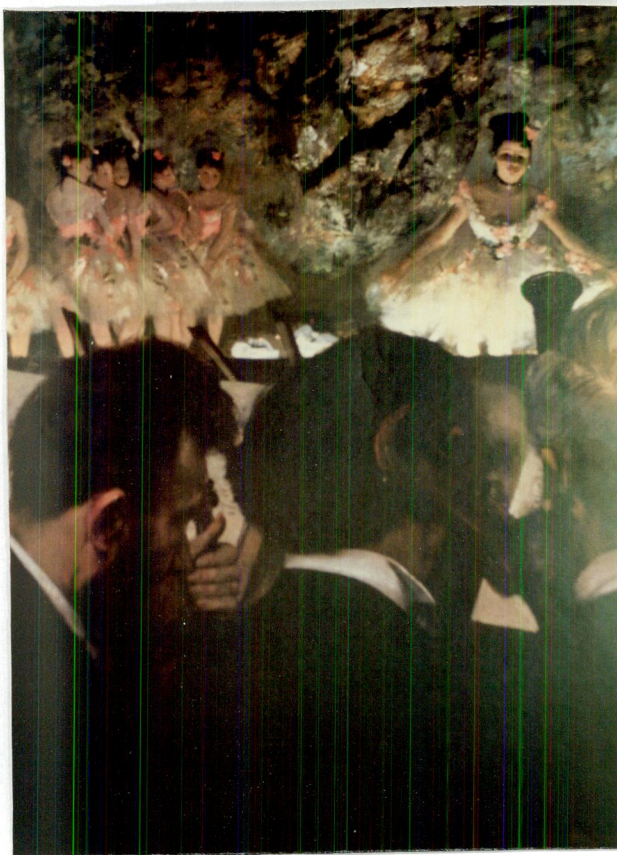


Fig (3)





Fig(4)





Fig (5)





Fig(6)





Fig (7)





Fig (8)





Fig (9)





Fig (10)





Fig (11)



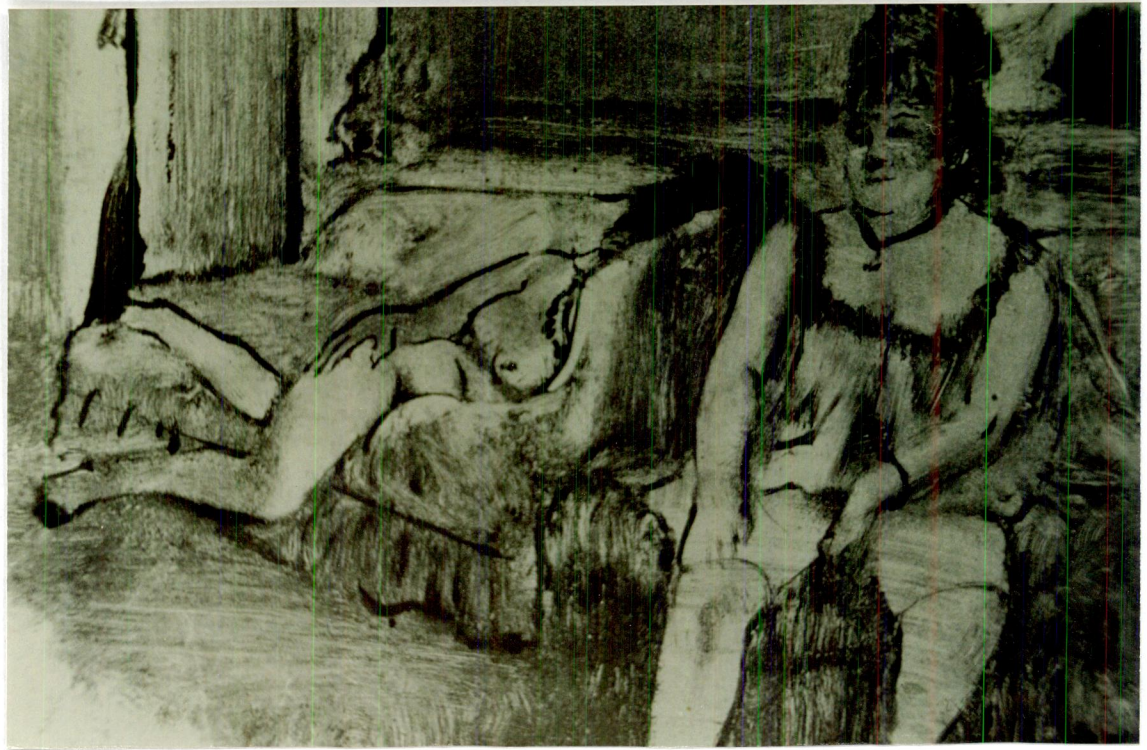


Fig (12)





Fig (13)





Fig (14)



INTRODUCTION

Degas has often been referred to as an Impressionist painter. His association with this movement stems primarily from the fact that he was a young emerging artist during the Impressionist period. The similarities between Degas's work and the work of the Impressionists are minimal.

The objective of this thesis is to highlight Degas's primary influences which contributed to his development as a Realist painter. His paintings and pastels are examined, indicating the progression of Degas's choice of subject matter, and the reasons why his work changed so dramatically during his career.

CHAPTER ONE

Degas's initial training into the world of art began under Louis Lamothe in 1854. One of the reasons why Degas would always retain a great respect for the Classical tradition in painting may be because Lamothe was a devoted disciple of Ingres, who had been the great upholder of this style of painting. Prior to this however, while studying law against his will, Degas had often frequented the Louvre Art Gallery, studying the Old Masters and copying many of the paintings there.

He studied under Lamothe for a year before graduating to the Ecole des Beaux - Arts but did not enjoy the time he spent there. In Lamothe, Degas had been lucky enough to find a teacher who limited his number of students and therefore was able to devote more time to each individual. The Ecole des Beaux - Arts however, was renowned for its jealousies and its competitive attitude - something that Degas obviously wanted no part in.

After having spent a few months there, Degas continued his education by himself, travelling between Rome and France, filling notebooks with his studies and paintings of the classicist artists, in order that he might learn their techniques.

Ingres was to remain his chief influence. They met only on one occasion, when Degas told him of his love for painting, and asked Ingres for advice. Ingres's words were to have a lasting effect on Degas throughout his career; 'Draw lines young man, draw lines, whether from memory or after nature. Then you will be a good artist'(1)

Degas lived by these words, and obviously had great admiration for Ingres's philosophies. He said, 'You can't quote a remark of Ingres that isn't a masterpiece'.(2)

Degas's admiration for Ingres is evident in his notebooks where many of his early studies are executed in a very linear fashion and are devoid of any tonal qualities. The Classicists and Romantics, from Daumier to Ingres have been meticulously copied using a delicate line.

Degas was a man obsessed with perfection, rarely if ever satisfied with his finished pieces, he often tried to retouch them - sometimes even buying back pictures he had already sold but that he still was not happy with. However, he did not have the necessary skills to take on such a task, and he destroyed many of his paintings.

Throughout his career Degas believed painting to be a craft - he felt it was more of a learning process than a talent and would always be sceptical of those who thought otherwise. Even in his later years when speaking to Henri Ronalt of a piece he was working on, he admitted; 'How I floundered at first, ye Gods! And how little we understand what we are doing if we do not let our craft take a little care of the things that we need. It is all very well to say that everything can be done by simplicity. One does perhaps succeed but how disgustingly'.(3)

In 1856, Degas left for Italy, in order to continue his studies and it was here that he first met Gustav Moreau. Moreau was teaching evening classes at the Villa Medici in Rome and he became a close mentor and companion of Degas. Recognising the fact that Degas was already an accomplished draughtsman, Moreau directed him more towards colour studies, paying less attention to intricate details. It was mainly these new discoveries in colour which prompted Degas to turn his attention more towards the work of Delacroix rather than the earlier influences whom Lamothe had so highly revered.

In 1862 the first Oriental artshop opened in Paris, dealing in many kinds of Far Eastern art and craft. This aroused great interest among many painters at the time, so different was it to any of the art they were usually accustomed to. Degas was fascinated with this work and over the years he amassed a large collection of Japanese art. The technical aspects of this artform and the skilled draughtsmanship required would have greatly appealed to Degas. The formal discipline in Japanese art made any sort of self-indulgent aestheticism impossible. Sharp lines played a strong part, especially in the Japanese print, and the compositional arrangement often resulted in cropped figures and objects at the edge of the print. Although this was the direct opposite to what Lamothe would have taught Degas, these features are frequently evident in Degas's later work.

It was not merely technique, but also subject matter which Degas was attracted to. The inspiration from which the Japanese drew their art came from the streets, brothels and shops of the city. To take pure normality and incorporate it into an artform had rarely been practiced before in France - any sort of contemporary attempts in art had previously consisted of modernising painting techniques and compositional approaches to what was still relatively timeless subject matter. Portraiture, nudes or still lives did not in any way reflect the modern day France of that time.

The Japanese depictions of modern life were similar to the type of subject matter Degas was later to paint in Paris - the mundane aspects of urban life such as laundresses and prostitutes, as well as the entertainments such as the ballet and the cafe concerts.

Similar also was the manner in which Degas would depict them, without any idealizing or beautifying of his subjects, but instead showing an honest account of what he saw before him.

This true to life approach which Degas employed is also undoubtedly attributed to the great upheavals in the attitudes to art which began with the Impressionist movement in the early 1860s. The Impressionists were the ancestors of a long tradition of imitative art but they were also pioneers of a cynicism towards this concept. Likewise, the old categories of art were rejected by the Realist artists of this time, which was resulting in an obligation to develop an entirely new structure for art as a whole.

The Impressionists were concerned with light as a primary factor in their paintings. Their aim was to achieve a superior naturalism by the precise analysis of tone, colour and the play of light on subjects.

Many of Degas's paintings also show a keen interest in the use of light, but it was used in a stronger fashion, for Degas's line was much sharper than the soft effects that the Impressionists employed.

Although the Impressionists wanted to break away from the romanticizing of images which their predecessors had always done, it seemed that they still searched for the 'beautiful' image but in a more realistic fashion. They often painted out of doors to achieve the correct light effects in landscape painting for instance, yet still these images were often of a soft and dreamlike quality - these landscapes were not 'real' in the sense of being part of an everyday lifestyle.

Degas disagreed with this obsession of having to paint directly from nature, and told Berthe Morisot, the first woman to 'join' the Impressionists that the study of nature was unimportant because painting was a conventional art and that she would be better off studying the paintings of Holbein. To Vollard he said; "If I were the government I would have a special brigade of gendarmes to keep an eye on artists who paint landscapes from nature. Oh, I don't mean to kill anyone; just a little dose of birdshot now and again" (4)

Degas had always reconstructed scenes in his studio and he felt that artists were treating painting like a sport if they had to brave the elements in order to paint a study of nature.

His own interpretation of reality lay in his subject matter and how he treated it. Degas's approach was more 'solid', if one could call it that and for this reason his association with the Realist movement is stronger than any connections he may have had with the Impressionists.

The Realists held that the only valid subject for the contemporary artist was the contemporary world. To them, 'contemporary' implied an instant occurrence - a fragment of motion captured in a composition. They felt that an unstable image such as this came closer to reality than any sort of balanced, harmonious image ever could. Degas greatly favoured this fragmented composition, similar to Japanese art, for it is evident in virtually all of his paintings.

This idea of contemporary art automatically gave way to a completely new approach to subject matter, for the idea of art as a thing of beauty was rapidly becoming a notion of the past. Instead the previously neglected areas of modern life were being embraced. The daily life of the

middle and lower classes became a common theme within the Realist movement - themes which prior to this would not have even been considered as the basis for a pictorial composition.

A certain subjectivism was inherent in the Impressionists approach to nature, or realism and the Realists felt that this attitude could not result in a pictorially truthful image. They felt that objectivity was necessary in portraying an honest image, for the eschewing of any 'feeling' towards subject matter resulted in a truthful rendering of the nature of the material. This tended towards a cooler treatment of the subject matter with no obvious social or psychological overtones. It was almost a scientific approach, which in many ways was analogous to photography. Even the cropping of images at the edges of the picture - again similar to Japanese art - was a common feature which served to emphasise the instantaneous image caught suddenly unawares.

The attitude of many artists towards photography at this time was not favourable. Many feared that photography heralded the imminent demise of painting, for it was a commodity more or less available to the public, which meant that they had the means of creating their own compositions and did not have to rely on artists for their

choice of picture. Not only this, but the camera captured in an instant scenes which would take any painter a great deal of time to produce.

Many artists did turn to the photographic art as an aid to their work but just as many made the mistake of copying images directly from photographs, which not only meant that their personal style was marred, but also that their efforts were in vain, for the end result was a reproduction of a reproduction - where was the artistic treatment of paint in such an act?

Degas benefited from his approach to photography - 'He was among the first artists', said Paul Valery, 'to see what photography could teach the painter - and what the painter must be careful not to learn from it.(5)

Degas had a great interest in photography and looked upon it as a source of inspiration in many of his paintings, for it captured what he sought to achieve in his own work. By using photographs as reference points in some of his pieces, Degas was able to create his own wonderful effects of movement, especially in his ballet paintings and pastels. The camera had the ability to capture instant movement such as the swift actions of the ballet dancers - something the most brilliant painter could never

hope to achieve. Degas had asked Merante, a ballet master at the Opera for photographs so that he could study the movements of the dancers. Degas did not rely on photographic material alone however, he had also made many studies while actually at the concerts but obviously the photographs helped him to capture instantenous movements which the dancers could not have posed for.

CHAPTER I - Footnotes

1. Keith Roberts, Degas, p.6.
2. Daniel Halevy, My Friend Degas, p.50.
3. Edgar Germain, Hilaire, Degas Letters, p.89.
4. Ambroise Vollard, Degas, an Intimate Portrait, p.56.
5. Aaron Scharf, Art and Photography

CHAPTER TWO

Degas's first ventures into personal composition were to reflect his close bond with classicism. The paintings of the Old Masters he had studied in the galleries of France were predominantly historic and religious themes and also portraits.

Degas had an excellent knowledge of the classical writers and his paintings 'Young Spartans', 1860-62 (Fig.1) was taken from a book entitled 'Life of Lycurgus' by Plutarch.

The picture is of a group of young girls and boys challenging each other - perhaps to combat. Degas had jotted down in one of his notebooks a scene in the book where the young boys and girls of Sparta wrestle with each other as their parents stand talking to the aged Lycurgus, and it is quite possible that this is the idea the painting stems from. It is an ambiguous piece, for it is hard to decipher precisely what the reasons are for the confrontation.

The influence of Ingres's fine line is apparent, both in the foreground and background figures - the latter are surprisingly detailed despite their distance from the frontal figures. There is also strong evidence that the piece has been worked over many times; a sign that Degas

was obviously not satisfied with his finished painting. The two year span of the date on the painting also suggests this. The legs of the girls have been redrawn so many times that there is a blurred sense of movement as they jostle against each other.

The subject matter itself is intriguing. The girls in Sparta were brought up in much the same manner as the boys at that time, for they were taught to dance, to run and throw the javelin. Staying at home was not encouraged. This in itself is a contemporary factor in the picture, despite the fact that the historical theme is evident.

Degas made many studies for this piece and through these he produced a very modern view of an ancient story. There are no grand displays of archaeology, apart from the costumes of the smaller figures in the background. Any of the ornate buildings or scenery one would expect in an historic painting are not there. The only Hellenistic features are the small white and red brick houses in the background. Degas's avoidance of any elevated sentiment in this picture shows a strong Realist influence. The Realists believed that an history painter was an artist who painted the heroic deeds of ancient Greece and Rome. To take an historical theme and explore the more mundane aspects, such as the young Spartans, was to create a more honest and real interpretation of times past.

During the 1850s and 1860s, Degas's strongest influences still centered around the Classical tradition. His main subject matter was portraiture. Degas executed many paintings of family and friends and even when his later subject matter took in a diverse range of subjects, the human face or figure always featured.

One of Degas's more ambitious paintings of this time was the portrait of his grandfather, Hilaire Degas; 1857 (Fig.2). A very austere painting, it is a highly controlled and well executed piece. The working of the paint gives a lovely richness, yet the colours are rather sombre - many of Degas's early paintings are similarly coloured. However, the dark tones are rescued by the soft play of light on the side of the face and the almost silvery-white waistcoat. The rigidity of the composition is identifiable with the Old Masters, although the finish of the picture is not as highly polished as Ingres might have done. There is a certain flatness about the piece, and it lacks any real sense of perspective. Degas's grandfather does not quite seem to be sitting back into his chair. However, the strong verticals and horizontals serve to strengthen his somewhat forbidding image. Despite the traditional influences which are evident - the lack of perspective and rigidity of the composition, the

overall effect is certainly more realistic than any of Ingres's portraits. Rather than turn a blind eye to the infirmities of the old man, Degas has painted in the tired eyes, and even the walking cane which Hilaire Degas obviously needed to get around. It is a truthful portrait of a man in old age, whereas classical portraits tended towards glamourisation - showing people only what they wanted to see in themselves. Both Degas and his grandfather were very close, yet the image of this painting gives the impression that when Degas was composing it he took a highly objective approach. He removed any indications of personal involvement with his grandfather and produced a frank and honest account of the frailty of old age.

This painting has strong overtones of Realism. Although it is not a contemporary painting in the sense of a modern lifestyle, the frankness in how Degas paints what he sees is not an approach which the Romantic or Classical painters would have used.

Degas's first compositions of modern day lifestyles in France began with his racetrack paintings. The racetrack with its combination of fine thoroughbreds, fashionable

crowds and dynamic atmosphere held a marvellous range of themes for Realist painters. For Degas the linear qualities of the powerful equine species would also have presented a wonderful challenge to his delicate use of line.

One of these early racetrack paintings is 'Racehorses before the Stands', 1866-68 (Fig 3). Although this painting does not capture the flurry of activity associated with the races - the thronging crowds and bright colours this is because Degas has partially isolated the crowd and instead has turned his attention to the tense moments before the race. This was something that Degas often tended to do. Rather than paint an actual event taking place, Degas was more attracted to the tense before and after of an occasion - this is especially evident in his many studies of the dance rehearsals for the ballet.

There are suggestions of an Oriental influence in this piece. The Japanese frequently used diagonal effects in their compositions, often resulting in the enlarging of foreground figures and the dwarfing of subjects slightly further back in depth. This approach has been adopted by Degas in this composition, resulting in a triangular effect created by the slanted row of horses and the line of spectators receding until they join at the central background of the canvas.

The position of the racehorse in the far background of the composition also suggests the use of photography. Degas would have to have studied a photograph in order to capture the movement of the bolting horse, for the human eye could not have captured such a rapid movement. It was the incorporation of methods such as these which enabled Degas to benefit from the use of photography.

Many of Degas's early works displayed the tight control of structure which is evident in this piece. Despite the many difference artforms which he became acquainted with during the 1860s, Ingres's advice had held well, for Degas would always carefully draw the outline of whatever he was painting before filling in colour - almost as if paint were secondary to the linear structure of the piece.

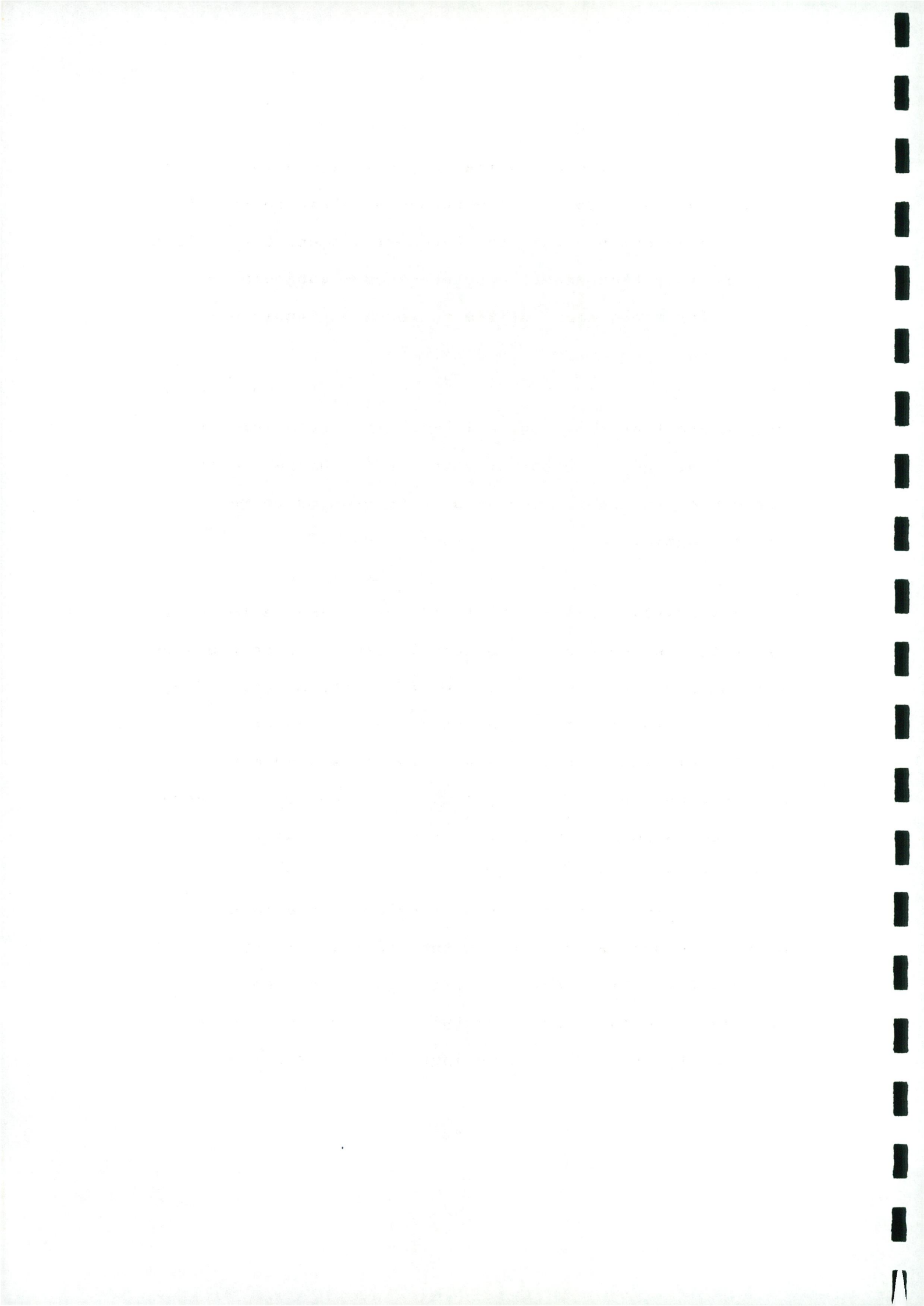
CHAPTER THREE

The 1870s saw the progression in the metamorphosis of Degas's style. He began to turn his attentions to the other areas of entertainment in Paris. One of his first paintings of the ballet, 'Orchestra Musicians, 1870-71 (Fig. 4) saw the start of the theme which Degas was to paint most frequently in his career.

His subject matter in this painting, although full of action, did not show the ballet actually being performed. Degas's fascination with the 'before and after' of an event presents itself yet again in this painting, as it does in 'Racehorses before the Stands'.

There is a beautiful compositional element in this piece where Degas places as much emphasis on the orchestra in their pit as he does on what is happening on stage. This accentuates the contrast between these two aspects of the ballet which are so closely linked and yet are virtually oblivious of each other.

The influence of the Realists is evident once more. Degas has isolated a single moment in this piece, which results in an acute observation of what the traditional artists would have deemed insignificant. They did not consider the passage of time in terms of split-seconds.



To them time always implied what had preceded and what would follow. The capturing of the isolated instants in this painting places all importance on a single moment and also emphasises the reality of the situation, for it is a picture in motion, where none of Degas's subjects are posing for a painting but are engrossed in their work.

There is no artificiality in the poses of the musicians. It appears that the principal ballerina is taking her final bow, and that the attention of the orchestra is fixed upon their sheet music as they prepare to begin playing again.

The disorderly arrangement of the supporting ballet cast, dimly lit in the background, highlights the fact that they are obviously not in the middle of a performance. They seem to be waiting to leave the stage, and hover uncertainly in the background. Their awkward stances suggest nothing of the gracefulness normally associated with the ballet Degas's utilisation of his paint in this piece is marvellous in its changes of texture and opacity. The three members of the orchestra in the front of the picture are painted in the traditional style. The lines within which the paint fills the space are especially obvious in the clothing of the men, and the feeling of restraint in technique is equally palable.

The ballerinas however, are handled in a much looser fashion. There is a more sensitive treatment evident here, despite what is probably quite a harsh glare from the stage lights. The dancer in the foreground is bathed in a soft warm glow of light, giving her an almost fairytale look, and there is not much evidence of rigid outlines here; in fact her right arm in the picture practically disintegrates into a blue as her hand rests upon the delicate gauze of her ballet tutu. In the background the other dancers are depicted in a softer blue of colour, with their skirts slightly highlighted again in the stage lights.

Right at the back of the stage is encountered another completely different painting technique. The backdrop is virtually a riot of colours, darks and lights. There is evidence of an Oriental influence. It appears to be a forest, yet the slanting treatment of its branches executed in the diagonal linear fashion of the Japanese gives an abstracted disorientated feel of movement. Even the highlights of colour in the centre of the backdrop give the illusion that there is something else to see behind the forest.

Degas would not have painted this picture from life but instead would probably have taken many sketches, and no doubt have employed the use of photography. The composition of the piece is similar to a photograph, for the fragmenting of the musician at the right hand side suggests a random choice of subject matter, which highlights the instantaneousness of the piece.

Despite the fact that the picture may not have been painted directly from life, there still remains a solid sense of reality about the piece. There is expression on every face that is contained within the composition; the concentration of the orchestra, the rapture on the face of the leading dancer - there even seems to be a slight expression of jealousy on the faces of the background dancers, wishing they could be the lucky ones to bask in the sole glory of public adoration. It is not hard to imagine what it would have been like sitting among the audience, looking at the beautiful gracefulness of the ballet, yet often noticing one of the musicians or the ballerinas drop their glamorous front when they thought they were not being watched. It is as if the observer has been granted the privilege to see the ballet as they never would had they been in the audience to see the glamour of the ballet only.

In 1870, France declared war on Prussia and the Franco-Prussian war followed. Degas volunteered for the National Guard but his eyesight was badly damaged from sleeping under the cold draught of an open window whilst serving with the artillery. Both he and his brother Rene decided to visit their relations living in New Orleans to get away for a few months after the war. Degas did little work while he was there as his eyes had to be rested. He attempted to paint portraits of his relatives but found it very difficult as his eyes found it hard to withstand the bright Louisiana daylight. 'I am doing some family portraits, but the main thing will be after my return', (1) Degas wrote home to France. Because he was surrounded by so much that he wanted to paint but couldn't, either because of his eyesight or because of his limited time there, Degas found himself frustrated and wished to return home.'I am accumulating plans which would take me six lifetimes to complete. In six weeks time I shall drop the, without regret, in order to regain and never more to leave my home'. 2.

Degas concentrated mainly on portraits of his family, but was not happy with the results. He complained that his relations did not take him seriously while he was painting them, and that he found it hard to concentrate for long on each painting.

The one painting produced which Degas was actually pleased with was called 'Portraits in an Office'; 1873 (Fig. 5). He described it as 'a raw picture if ever there was one, and I think from a better hand than many another'. (3)

The most obvious influence evident in this painting is undoubtedly photography. The artist George Frederic Watts made the claim that photography 'has unfortunately introduced into art a misconception of perspective which is as ugly as false'.(4) Many claimed that the reason for the elongated appearance in the perspective of the room was a result of Degas copying the shape of the interior from a photograph. Whether this is the case or not, Degas has achieved a wonderful sense of space partly due to the sparsity of the furniture in the room, and also because of the high glass window partitions leading through to another office at the left hand side of the picture.

It is a group portrait, in which Degas used his brothers and other relatives and friends as the subjects for the portrait which suggests that he reconstructed the scene himself and did not paint it from real life.

Degas's aim was to produce a picture of modern life in America - men at work in the Cotton Office, which was one of the primary industries in Louisiana at that time. He has managed to capture the hustle and bustle one would associate with a thriving industry. Degas has placed no primary importance on any of the fourteen men in the piece. They are all portrayed as workers involved in their own individual duty, except for the young man sitting down reading the newspaper who is identifiable as Degas's brother but then this was not their own but their uncle's place of business.

The tight control in Degas's line is a remarkable example of skilled draughtsmanship, and the detailing in the piece is impressive. Degas said that 'art is not a matter of what you can see, but what you can make others see'.(5) There is plenty in this piece which goes unnoticed at first - the small details of the table and the coats hanging up in the background. There are also some unusual features around the table in the foreground which are barely noticeable. The direction of shadow cast from the leg of the table does not correspond with the direction of the shadow in the rest of the room. Neither do the legs of the man who is leaning on the table seem to join with his body. The foot is placed too far back to be anything other than the position of a contortionist!

These subtleties give the effect of enchancing what is already a highly complex study. Degas achieved a wonderfully realistic image of an atmosphere so difference to that of his native France. The impartial attitude Degas took, placing equal importance on everything in the picture enhances the reality of the situation. When Degas had completed this painting he returned to Paris to continue his work there.

CHAPTER THREE - Footnotes

1. Degas's Letters, p.18
2. Degas's Letters, p.21
3. Degas's Letters, p.29
4. Art and Photography, Aaron Scharf, p.192

CHAPTER FOUR

Degas's return to Paris in 1873 also signalled the advent of new changes in France. His father died, leaving many debts and this was to radically alter Degas's lifestyle, for he spent the rest of his career trying to support his family and attempting to clear the debts that they now owed.

The first signs of the Impressionist movement were also beginning to show themselves. The first exhibition was in April 1874, although it did not go under the name 'Impressionist'. Degas was involved in recruiting participants for the show. He was also involved in an Impressionist journal entitled 'Le jour et la nuit' but it never made publication. Yet despite Degas's contributions to the exhibitions and publicities, 'Impressionist' was not a name that he was happy to be labelled with. It seemed that to Degas, Impressionism was something he could learn and benefit from but he obviously had no intention of steeping himself in everything that the Impressionists believed in.

Degas's approach to painting held far stronger qualities of realism than the Impressionists whose chief concern revolved around light and how it affected subject matter. Degas's preoccupation at this time was to capture contemporary life in France. His subject matter

was to change radically. Although Degas had always painted women, the female figure became virtually his only subject matter for the rest of his career. He turned his attentions primarily to the French working girl. She was to remain Degas's main subject matter for the rest of his career. His consuming fascination with modern life led him not only to the ballet once more, but also to the previously neglected areas of urban life.

Degas's paintings of the ballet have a great beauty about them but not quite in what would have been the traditional sense at that time. His classical line is evident in these paintings and there is a new lease of life given to his palette. Ballet lessons and rehearsals are painted in a riot of activity.

One of the most ambitious paintings of this kind is the 'Dance Class' 1873 (Fig. 6). It is most notable for the large amount of figures Degas has included in the composition, which is certainly the most numerous amount in his ballet series. The emphasis is not on the performance of the ballet but a moment of rest in the middle of a rehearsal.

The room in which the dancers practice is an unusual affair, and the contrasts of darks and silvery lights give

the picture a vaguely surreal effect. Yet despite this predominant use of light, Degas has refined his sharpness of outline rather than dissolve the light as the Impressionists would have done. The solid verticals and horizontals of the room highlight the graceful movements of the practicing dancers and enhances their delicate costumes which seem almost diaphanous in the light.

It is a beautiful image yet not a painting which would have been considered an aesthetic accomplishment in the traditional sense.

The Realist influence in the painting is significant. Degas has captured a single moment in which all of the dancers have been frozen in mid-movement. This highlights the spontaneous imagery of the composition.

Degas has shown no interest in conveying any ideal image of movement in this piece apart from the dancers in the centre of the composition who are practicing their steps. They contrast sharply with the other ballerinas, many of whom appear quite ungainly, especially the dancer in the foreground who bends over to adjust her slipper. Neither do the stances of the dancers in the background give any indication of the effortless grace normally associated with the ballet.

Virtually every figure in the composition has been truncated in some way. Not only is this fragmentation reminiscent of photography but again the instantaneity of the observation becomes more apparent, for if Degas had painted the same scene even two seconds later, the full figures of the girls descending the stairs would have been contained within the composition. In fact the whole painting would have appeared quite different in terms of the positions of the dancers.

The depiction of this single movement highlights the Realists belief of time being the arrester of significance.

What Degas actually gave in his ballet paintings was an insight into what went on apart from the glitz and the magic of the ballet in performance which was all that people expected to see. He painted the ballet dancers at work, he showed the weariness on the faces of the ballerinas from practicing for so long. It really was a de-mystification of what people only saw as effortless grace on stage. A critic in 1877 wrote;

For those who are partial to the mysteries of the theatre, who would happily sneak behind the sets to enjoy a spectacle forbidden to outsiders, I recommendMr Degas. No one has so closely scrutinized that interior above whose door is written "The public is not permitted here".

This approach to the ordinary and unglamorous side of the ballet was a sign of Degas's gradual turn to the more mundane area of modern life that he was to pursue.

Degas was also fascinated by the women who sang for entertainment in the 'cafe-concerts' of Paris. These cafes were very fashionable, especially during the 1870s. The hosted a variety of acts, mainly comedy and singing. 'The Song of the Dog'; 1876-77 (Fig. 7) was originally a small monotype which Degas enlarged and worked over in pastel and gouache. The woman on stage was a famous singer of that time called 'Theresa' (her real name was Emma Valadon) and although Degas has painted a 'performance' picture there is a myriad of activity taking place in the audience which is scarcely noticeable at first.

The painting is a close reflection on contemporary life in France at that time. there is no sense of any historical reminiscence in the piece - the fact that Theresa was a celebrity of that time enhances the essence of modernity in the composition.

The image again is of the moment frozen in time.

Theresa, who is held together beautifully by Degas's delicate line has been captured in the middle of her song

as she performs her piece, engrossed in what she is doing. The people in the crowd enhance the immediacy of the situation by the varied directions and expressions on their faces.

It seems that the singer was not painted as the glamorous main subject of attraction but rather to stress the vivid scene of the cafe concert. The nocturnal setting, the artificial light and the movement among the crowd below all contribute to the colourful atmosphere of nightlife in Paris, presenting the observer with a moment of contemporary life in nineteenth century Paris which Degas managed to capture so effectively.

Not only was the theme of the city life so completely alien to any type of classical subject matter but the viewpoint from which Degas painted the cafe-concert was also out of context with the methodical, straightforward compositions normally associated with the Old Masters.

'The Song of the Dog' looks as if Degas painted it while actually on the stage beside Theresa and gives the impression that the observer can see more of the surroundings than the singer would be able to as she appears to be blinded by the glare of the stage lights. This whole approach gives the picture a casual aire, as if it was not planned or preconceived, thus highlighting the spontaniety of the painting.

There are also signs of the effects of photography. Degas has clearly defined the woman in the foreground but as the perspective recedes he has painted the audience slightly out of focus, while the trees and lamp-posts in the background are quite blurred. This is the same result one would get from a photograph taken in a shallow depth of field - figures closest to the camera would be sharper while the background features would not be clearly definable.

CHAPTER FOUR - Footnotes

1. Looking into Degas Uneasy images of women
and modern Life, Eunice Lipton, p.97

CHAPTER FIVE

Degas's later works of modern life led him to the urban reality of the lower class in Paris. The Realists were not limiting themselves to city life alone but were exploring the imagery of rural labour and the plight of the working peasant. Two-thirds of French society was still rural as late as the early 1870s.

Degas immersed himself in his native city, exploring the theme of the working woman in great detail. The subject matter was contemporary, and Degas's compositional structures were fresh and innovative.

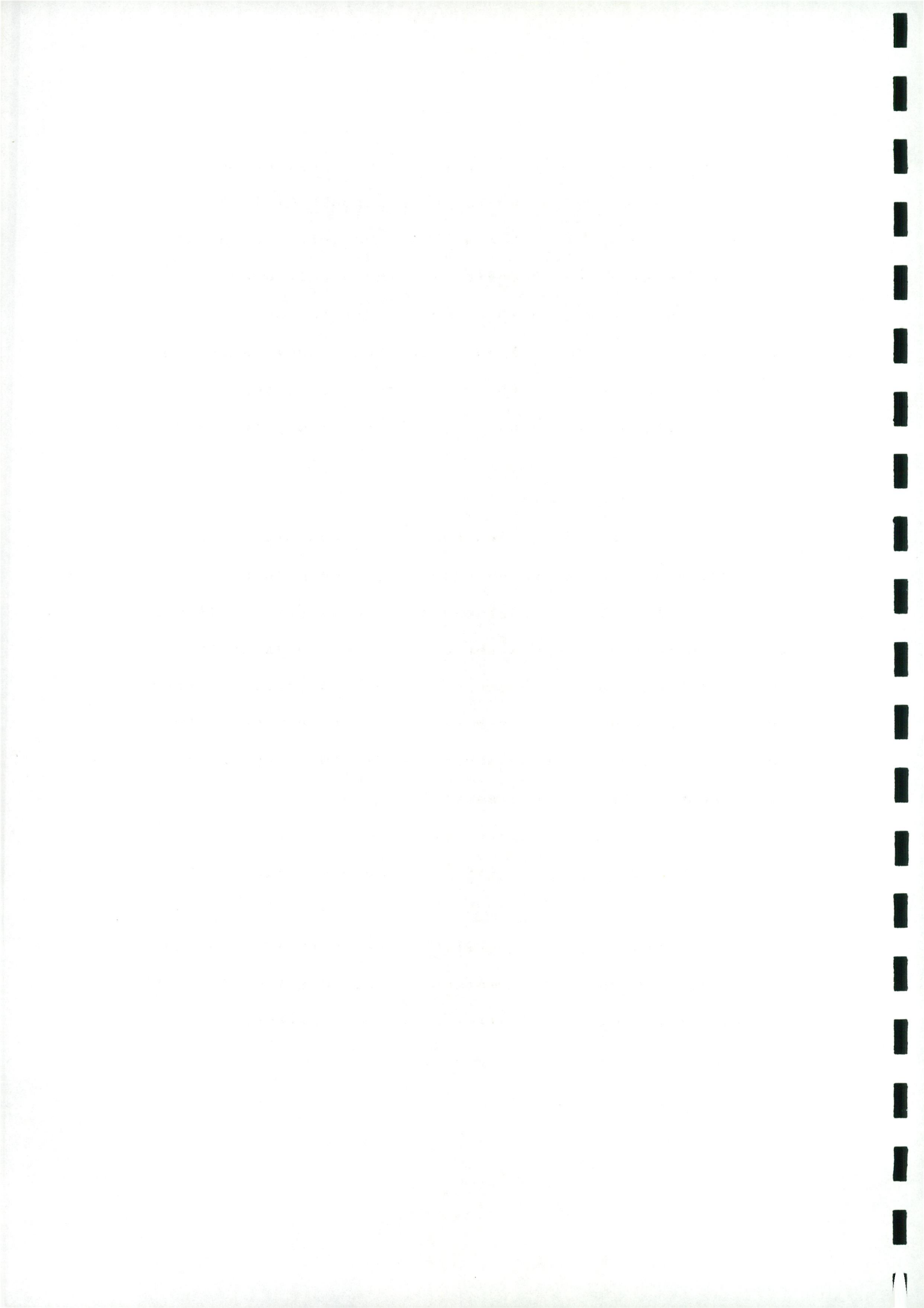
His Milliner series produced some surprisingly light hearted pictures. Degas had declared his 'liveliest admiration for the intensely human quality of young shopgirls' (1). It was partly this recognition of the human 'character' that Degas conveyed in his paintings of working class women which gave them so much more life than the most luxurious and majestic Ingres portrait could ever achieve.

It has been said that in Realism, the role played by observation is greater, that by convention smaller'. (2). This can be seen in 'The Milliner'; 1882 (Fig. 8). Although it is a simply worked study, it is the composition of the piece which is most arresting.

The young shopgirl is in a most informal pose as she cranes her body around the hat stand which she is in the process of arranging. Her position suggests no knowledge of the fact that she is being observed.

The diagonal slope of the shelf upon which she leans is reminiscent of the slanting composition often employed in Japanese art. This slant in the composition also gives the impression that the milliner is being spied upon from a vantage point which she is unaware of. The expression of absolute concentration on her face certainly epitomizes any 'human qualities' which Degas noted in French shopgirls, despite the fact that the Realists normally took an objective view in their paintings, removing any human emotion from their depictions of a subject. There is evidence here of a softer treatment of the young girl's face; the tacit signs of a luminous touch is evident. Although this type of approach is unusual for Degas, he has still managed to convey a highly convincing image of the feminine aspects associated with the milliners.

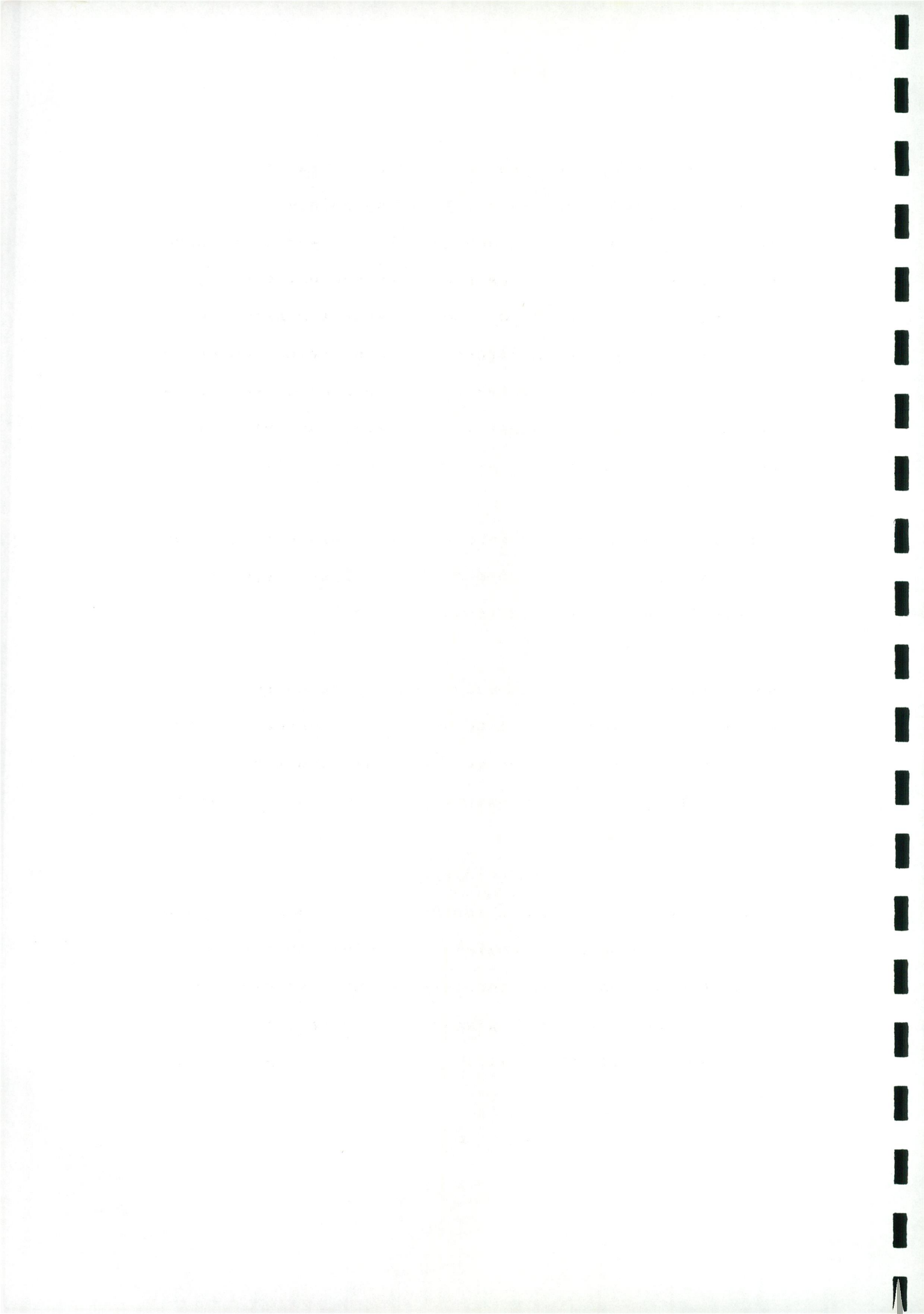
'At the Milliners'; 1882 (Fig. 9), expertly captures just this type of scene. Two women sit in the milliners, both obviously customers. One is trying on bonnets while the other proffers her opinion on how each one looks. They



are surrounded by a myriad of colourful hats, and this picture is surely the finest of all Degas's milliner series for its skill in technique of pastel. Although there is no sign of a shopgirl in the pastel, Degas captures the quintessential mood of what the hat shops were like; young women frequenting the establishment and admiring themselves as they tried on bonnet after bonnet. It was an essentially feminine and privileged pastime.

Degas's paintings of the entertainments and milliners were original and unusual in composition. They did not confirm to the rigid traditional values in art. Although the Romantic painters did not support the ideas of the Realists, artists such as Delacroix did not rule out the contemporary theme. 'The Beautiful is everywhere,' he said,.....and each man not only sees it, but absolutely must render it in his own way'. (3)

It is doubtful that Delacroix would have considered the laundresses of Paris to be 'beautiful' subjects. Degas was fascinated with the brutal reality of their strenuous labour however, and this series is a far cry from the somewhat more comfortable living of the milliner.



The Realists considered the working class in art to be every bit as important as any nobleman painted in his finery and riches. This approach to art was considered extreme in the nineteenth century, yet the paintings are relatively free from any deliberate social statements. The radicalism of the Realists lay in their choice of subject and how they treated it. The subject matter was important in their work but it was not necessarily the whole point of the painting. There were no blatant political messages in the paintings of the lower classes, although these scenes of working life would probably have unnerved the upper classes who felt that this type of art was dignifying the working class.

The Realists simply painted subjects relating to contemporary life of the late nineteenth century. They wanted their art to 'be of its time'(4), and the objective studies they made are truthful, unsentimental descriptions of urban life.

'Woman Ironing; 1884-86 (Fig. 10) is one such unglamorous piece. Degas painted straight onto unprimed canvas, making the oil paint much harder to apply and giving it a scratchy texture lacking in any richness of colour. Degas has epitomised the life of these women in a single

moment. The worker on the left has been caught in the middle of a yawn, and her hand grasps a bottle of wine, while the woman to the right exerts her fading energy into ironing the shirt on the table. Degas has captured the hardships of such a life, leaving nothing unobserved. The pasty complexions of the ironers and their reddened skin enhances the sense of stifling heat in which they must have had to work. Degas has again used the slanting format in the ironing table, creating a sense of the unseen observer and also indicating a Japanese influence.

This slanting effect occurs again in 'Woman Ironing'; 1882-86 (Fig.11) giving the impression that the woman is being peered at from a small opening - a grimy window perhaps, for she is out of focus. This viewpoint highlights the fact that prior to this the working class were virtually an underground race. They were regarded as unimportant by the upper and middle classes and had never been considered as suitable subject matter for a work of art. The room in which the woman irons is reminiscent of a kind of subterranean chamber, and this is enhanced by the fact that the observer is looking down upon the woman as she works. Degas was presenting many people in Paris with a lifestyle they knew nothing of and this could be a subtle touch of satire on Degas's part in placing the woman in such surroundings.

Of all Degas's studies of women, his most unusual are undoubtedly his brothel series. Executed in monotype, he completed at least fifty studies between 1879 and 1880.

While these scenes are quite explicit, Degas has approached the theme with a degree of humour, and the prostitutes have been rendered in a cartoon-like fashion. This type of caricature is similar to the style of the Japanese. Not only this but the freedom of range which Degas employed in portraying the brothels is also reminiscent of the Japanese woodart.

Out of all of Degas's depictions of women the brothel scenes are the only pictures which display any confrontation of the subject with the viewer. Prior to this Degas's women had appeared unaware that they were being painted or looked at. In 'Resting'; 1876-77 (Fig.12) the woman in the foreground gazes out at the viewer as she unashamedly adjusts her stocking, waiting for the next client.

'The Reluctant Client'; 1876-77 (Fig.13) depicts a bawdy group of women teasing a young man who seems quite out of his depth in his surroundings. Here Degas has eschewed the ethics of male dominance and in turn transformed him into a figure of derision.

There is a brash confidence in most of the women in this series. Degas has not missed any of the lewd gestures normally associated with the prostitute, nor has he glamorised either the women or their native habitat. There is no moralising in these studies, simply realistic imagery of the brothels of Paris in the 1870s.

Nude figure drawing had not featured much in Degas's work until his later years. From the 1880s onwards it dominated his work.

The classical nude had always been considered an object of beauty. Painters such as Ingres had often abstracted the anatomy of their nudes in order to heighten their aesthetic appeal.

Degas's approach reflected none of the traditional ideas towards the rendering of a beautiful figure. His nudes were of women bathing or drying themselves. A result of poses such as these meant that Degas's figures were captured in motion. Instead of a gracefully posed figure, Degas painted crouched women washing themselves, demonstrating the natural movements of the bare body.

In 'Nude Women Drying Her Foot'; 1885-86 (Fig.14) Degas's primary interest lay in examining the woman while she was practically doubled over, drying herself. The pose was most unorthodox for that time. The woman is bent at an awkward angle, and as she reaches forward to dry her foot, her stomach naturally folds and touches her thigh. Her legs look quite elongated and her face has a reddish tinge from the heat of the water in the bath - Degas missed none of the model's imperfections, and there is no evidence that he may have tried to beautify her in any way. The essence of this piece is that it retained its honesty in what was seen.

This cool detachment in the straightforward rendering of a truthful image was analogous to the practices of the Realists. The woman concentrates on what she is doing and is not regarding anything else around her.

The woman's oblivion to anything else highlights the fact that what she is doing is of a very personal nature. There is an intimacy about Degas's bathers which is unparalleled by any of the traditional nudes. This is because Degas left nothing to the imagination of the observer when he painted these women. They were depicted with a brutal honesty which unsettled many, for the female nud had never before been portrayed in such a way.

The Realists placed great value on confronting their subject matter with a fresh approach. They stressed the importance of disregarding the pre-conceived ideas on art that the traditional painters believed were so indispensable.

By altering the imagery associated with the classical woman in art, Degas managed to achieve a very modern and realistic interpretation of the female nude.

This can also be said of Degas's other choices of subject matter; his laundresses, milliners and the ballet. By choosing unconventional themes such as these, Degas's style was unhampered by the rigid conforms of traditional art. His ideas were unspoiled by other painters's codes of discipline. The Realists felt that this was the only way any artist would ever exercise a contemporary attitude to nineteenth century France and explore fully the potential that was there to be used as subject matter. It as through the Realist movement that Degas emerged as a truthful painter of modern life; unique in style and subject matter.

CHAPTER FIVE - Footnotes

1. Degas, p.339
2. Linda Nochlin, Realism, p.18
3. Linda Nochlin, Realism, p.104

CONCLUSION

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From exploring Degas's work, it is obvious that his connections with the Realists far outweigh any associations he may have had with the Impressionists.

The honesty in Degas's observation and the detached approach he employed in his work enabled him to remove any sentimentality he may have felt towards his subjects. He was therefore able to render a series of paintings rich in information of the lives of the working classes in France. His images were truthful and sometimes brutally realistic.

Degas was not a worshipper of the beautiful or the sublime. His sense of aesthetic lay in the ordinary lifestyle of the average individual. His fascination with daily life indicated his practical approach to art, and reflected the poor opinion he had of artists who beautified and glamorised their paintings, affecting what they saw before them.

Degas's subject matter varied during his life but his main theme remained more or less consistent. Degas explored the life of the working woman in great detail, translating into paint subjects which had never before been put on canvas. The instantaneous image was captured in his paintings, and moments of contemporary life in nineteenth century France were immortalised. As a result of the Realist movement, Degas emerged as a painter who was truly 'of his time'.

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