Edgar Degas
(1834 - 1917)

Considered as one of the masters of modern art in the late 19th century, Edgar Degas is celebrated for his innovation, skill, and talent of perception. Trained in classical drafting, Degas set himself apart from the Impressionist movement of his time.

Edgar Degas was born into an aristocratic family of bankers on July 19, 1834. Because of his mother’s death in 1837, the young Degas’ most influential role models were his father and grandfather.

Despite his desire to paint, Degas attended law school as a young man. However, he stopped his studies in 1853, and began frequenting the studio of Felix Joseph Barrias. There he spent most of his time copying Renaissance works.

Between the years 1854 and 1859, Degas made several trips to Italy, where he studied with old masters. Under their apprenticeship, he painted historical paintings and portraits of his relatives. Some of the most notable of these paintings are Portrait of Marguerite de Gas, the Artist’s Sister (1860), and Portrait of Achille de Gas in the Uniform of a Cadet (1857).

Degas also studied at the École des Beaux-Arts under a disciple of the famous French classicist J. A. D. Ingres.

Although he was painting in the midst of the Impressionist movement, Degas preferred his methods of creation. For example, he preferred to work in his studio as he was uninterested in the study of natural light that fascinated the Impressionists. The common subjects of his works are racecourses, theaters, cafés, music halls, and boudoirs.

Degas’ work was also preoccupied with the image of woman. He studied and painted portraits of dancers, milliners, and laundresses. His objective when painting another person was to capture each subject in her natural and spontaneous course of action. It was with a historical painting, The Suffering of the City of New Orleans (1865) that Degas made his salon debut in 1865. The picture, however, did not receive the attention it deserved.
In 1872, with his younger brother René, Degas traveled to New York and New Orleans where his uncle lived. Degas stayed in Louisiana for five months and returned to Paris in February 1873. He completed a number of works during his stay in America.

Upon his return to America, Degas helped organize the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874.

In the 1880s, Degas’ eyesight began to fail. He worked around this new obstacle, however, as he began to work with sculpture and pastels – two new mediums that did not require intense visual activity.

Degas’ pastels drawings are described as being vibrant in color, eloquent in expression, and a simple in style.

Edgar Degas died in Paris on September 27, 1917 at the age of 83. He did not reach his deserved height of popularity until after his death.

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