

SUBVERSION OF THE GAZE: DEGAS AND THE SOCIAL  
IMPLICATIONS OF HIS DANCERS

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University of Missouri- Kansas City, 2011

ABSTRACT

Edgar Degas' portrayal of women has generated particular interest. His subjects were often thought to be women of ill-repute, yet Degas shows them hard at work. I believe that Degas purposefully set out to chronicle the plight of working women as part of his commitment to realism in art. Looking at his series of ballet paintings and contrasting them with the works of other contemporary artists, I hope to show that Degas worked with a social consciousness of the unfair role forced on women in his society.

I will look at historical data, including information on the Paris Opera and its habitués. The concluding in-depth analysis of Degas' ballet images will place Degas' work in relation to other artists of his day working with similar subject matter. I hope to show that Degas was an artist both conscious of and sympathetic to the circumstances of the women he depicted.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Subversion of the Gaze Degas and the Social Implications of his Dancers,” presented by Lisa S. Martin, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. SETTING THE STAGE: POLITICS, CULTURE, AND GENDER ROLES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE .....	10
3. ALL THAT GLITTERS: LIFE AT THE PARIS OPÉRA .....	21
4. DEGAS AND HIS DANCERS.....	31
5. CONCLUSION.....	42
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	57
VITA .....	61

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Edgar Degas, <i>La classe de danse (The Dancing class)</i> , oil on canvas, c. 1873-75, 85 x 75 cm (33 1/2 x 29 1/2 in), Musée d'Orsay, Paris .....	45
2. Edgar Degas, <i>L'etoile [La danseuse sur la scene](The Star [Dancer on Stage])</i> , pastel on paper, 1878, 60 x 44 cm (23 5/8 x 17 3/8 in), Musée d'Orsay, Paris .....	46
3. Edgar Degas, <i>The Ballet Class</i> , c. 1880, oil on canvas, 32 3/8 x 30 1/4 in (82.2 x 76.8 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art.....	47
4. Edgar Degas, <i>The Rehearsal</i> , oil on canvas, c. 1873-78, 41 x 61.7 cm (18 1/2 x 24 3/8 in), Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA .....	48
5. Octave Tassaert, <i>Une Famille Malheureuse on le Suicide (One Family's Misfortune with Suicide)</i> , 1849, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France ...	48
6. Honoré Daumier, <i>The Third-Class Carriage</i> , 1863-65, oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 35 1/2 in. (65.4 x 90.2 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York..	49
7. Honoré Daumier, <i>The First Class Carriage</i> , watercolor, ink wash and charcoal on slightly textured paper, 1864, 8 1/16 x 11 13/16 in. (20.5 x 30 cm). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD .....	50
8. Honoré Daumier, <i>The Second Class Carriage</i> , watercolor, ink wash and charcoal on moderately textured paper, 1864, 8 1/16 x 11 7/8 in. (20.5 x 30.1 cm), The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD .....	50
9. The Paris Opera, Paris, France, Charles Garnier 1857-1874.....	51
10. Grand Staircase, The Paris Opera, Paris, France. Charles Garnier, 1857-1874 .....	52
11. Unknown, <i>Painting of the Foyer de la Danse</i> , c. 1900.....	52
12. Edgar Degas, <i>Dancer Leaving her Dressing Room</i> , oil on canvas, c. 1879, Private Collection .....	53

13. Edgar Degas, <i>Dancers Backstage</i> , 1876/1883, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection .....	53
14. Edgar Degas, <i>Waiting</i> , c. 1882, pastel on paper. 19 x 24 in. The Getty Center Los Angeles.....	54
15. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. <i>Seated Dancer in Pink Tights</i> , 1890, thinned oil and pastel on board, Private Collection .....	55
16. Manet. <i>A Bar at the Folies-Bergère</i> , Édouard Manet, 1882, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London .....	56
17. Edgar Degas, <i>At the Milliner</i> , 1882-1885, oil on canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.....	56

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, much debate has focused on the social connotations of the work of notable nineteenth-century Impressionists. The art of Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, and particularly Edgar Degas is often at the center of these discussions because their depictions of the lives of Parisians during that time gives us a “snapshot” of everyday occurrences rife with deeper meaning and context. Degas’ portrayal of working women in society has generated particular interest and debate. Though the women depicted by him were often considered to be of ill-repute, he shows them hard at work rehearsing, laundering clothes, or ironing.

In her book, *Looking into Degas (1987)*, Eunice Lipton proposes that in painting his genre scenes, Degas unwittingly recorded social concerns, such as class and the struggles of women. “Degas made beautiful and powerful paintings that both interpreted and shaped the realities of his time...Although Degas did not set out to chronicle those struggles, it was, I believe, inevitable that he did so.” Using an in-depth sociological approach, she relates Degas’ paintings to the historical facts of the lives of Parisian women. Lipton’s study prompted a range of responses. In his review for Woman’s Art Journal, Bradley Collins

criticized Lipton for not including more thorough, formal analyses on Degas' works.<sup>1</sup>

Kathleen Adler, in The Burlington Magazine, states that, "Both chapters [on the Ballet and Laundresses] contain interesting and illuminating information on the two groups of women. The problem lies in reconciling this data with Degas' paintings..."<sup>2</sup> In her review for Art Bulletin, Anne McCauley comments on Lipton's failure to define a dominant ideology in her critique of Degas' paintings, but does concede that, "Unless we assume that every depiction of a female is sexually provocative, we must, in all fairness, locate Degas' dancers at the farthest remove from the sexually enticing females who form the staple of nineteenth-century painting and sculpture."<sup>3</sup>

I believe that rather than being an inevitable result of his paintings, Degas purposefully set out to chronicle the plight of working women in nineteenth-century Paris as part of his commitment to realism in art, and that this is evidenced in his inclusion of certain otherwise inexplicable details in his rendering of subjects. Looking particularly at his dance paintings and contrasting them with the works of other contemporary artists, I hope to show that Degas undoubtedly worked with a social consciousness of the unfair role working women in his society were forced to play and the often harsh realities of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley Collins Jr., "Review: Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life by Eunice Lipton," *Woman's Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring, 1998): 41.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Adler, "Review: Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women in Modern Life by Eunice Lipton," *The Burlington Magazine* 129, no. 1014 (Sep., 1987): 608.

<sup>3</sup> Anne McCauley, "Review: Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women in Modern Life by Eunice Lipton," *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 1 (March, 1989): 146.

In Paris during the 1800s, working women were faced with uncertain economic realities. Though the prevailing middle-class ideal for women was a separation between the domestic world of the wife's household responsibilities and the exterior world of commerce inhabited by men, young girls and women were often forced to leave their homes in order to find employment that would help supplement their family's income. They found even harsher conditions in the city. "Daughters who were sent out of the house to supplement the family income often encountered severe financial problems in their new lives, especially if they were far from home. The idea may have been that they would eventually return to the family they were assisting, but the reality was that they were on their own..."<sup>4</sup> A narrow range of employment opportunities were open to them and very few of these jobs allowed for more than subsistence. Because of this harsh monetary fact, these young women were often forced into prostitution to provide the necessities of food and shelter. Ballet was one of the highest paying professions open to young girls. They would start the rigorous training that classical dance required as early as age seven. However, many dancers still struggled to make a living. The circumstances of working women led to the perception that they, particularly those employed as milliners, maids, laundresses and dancers, were loose women, devoid of moral fiber.<sup>5</sup>

This focus on the morals of working women became a common theme in nineteenth-century paintings and literature, such as the painting *Nana* by Édouard Manet

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<sup>4</sup> Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

and the novels Nana and L'Assommoir by Émile Zola. The scantily clad laundress, coquettishly gazing out at the viewer, the beautiful hat maker, seductively engaging the buyer, or the glamorous ballet dancer, provocatively posed on stage, fed the stereotypes of working women. All of these women, so invitingly posed, waiting for the male viewer, became mere objects to be consumed.

Degas' paintings appear to splinter from his fellow Impressionists, however. In his scenes we do not see an idealized woman, waiting for a consumer, boldly meeting the viewer's gaze with a challenge of her own. Degas, instead, depicts his dancers dancing; hard at work, involved in the physically demanding routines of their profession. In analyzing the dance series paintings of Degas, three key commonalities become apparent. These similarities, found in some combination in all of his ballet works, support the theory that Degas intended for his paintings to serve, to some degree, as a social commentary on the hard work involved in being a ballet dancer and the difficulties these dancers faced in regard to public perception of their work.

The first characteristic found in many of his works is the setting. While it is understood that ballet itself is a very public endeavor, Degas overwhelmingly chooses to portray dance rehearsals or scenes from backstage as opposed to performances. In *The Dancing Class*, 1874, (Figure 1) we are privy to a rehearsal. The dancers depicted are either practicing under the watchful eye of their instructor, practicing their steps solo, or casually lounging about, waiting for their turn. The two most prominent figures have their backs turned to the viewer. This is a private moment, free of viewers, evidenced by their casual gestures. The dancer to the far left awkwardly scratches her back; in front of her a dancer

adjusts an earring. Further back a girl sweeps aside her bangs, and in the back corner, a dancer appears to massage her neck. None of the figures look out of the painting; they are all focused inward on the rehearsal. In his depictions of backstage scenes, Degas takes pleasure in revealing the artifice on which the ballet is formed. In his painting *L'Etoile*, of 1875, (Figure 2) we see a dancer placed prominently in the foreground rehearsing for a performance. In the background, there are other dancers waiting behind the stage props to make their entrances. There is also the lurking presence of a well dressed man, half hidden behind the sets, that creates a menacing voyeuristic presence.

Another aspect found in Degas' scenes is the presence of chaperones. This shows a little recognized fact of the ballet dancer's life. The young ladies involved in the dance were often accompanied by a chaperone who attended classes with them, helped with costuming, and kept away unsavory sorts. Positioned in the back corner of *The Dancing Class*, or more prominently placed in *The Ballet Class*, c. 1878-1880, (Figure 3) these women often appear, helping their charges with costumes, watching as they practice their steps, or merely reading. In the case of *The Ballet Class*, the chaperone appears to act as a visual barrier between the viewer and the male gaze, placed as she is in the center foreground of the picture.

The third commonality found in the dance series paintings is the manner in which Degas represents the young women themselves. First, their figures occupy only a small part of the picture plane and in most instances, Degas has chosen to depict the dancers with very vague and abstracted features. They become blotches of color with sketchy eyes, mouths, and noses. Sometimes eyebrows are included, but just as often not. Of his dancers

with more detailed faces, Degas appears to have made an effort to portray them as plain or outright unattractive, as is the case of *The Rehearsal*, 1879 (Figure 4). The dancers practicing their steps have an eerie, unfinished quality about them. This character of his painting came under criticism from his contemporaries. Some of his strongest critics of the dance series were Paul Mantz and J.K. Huysmans, who described the figures as tired, ugly, and terrible. Huysmans believed that Degas choice to render the figures in such a way indicated a misogynistic view of the dancers.<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate result of all these characteristics is Degas' active subversion of the male gaze. In this, he differs most greatly from his contemporaries. In stripping away the artifice that surrounds the dancers and, particularly, the Opera he portrays and emphasizes their craft. Degas' dancers became more than just commodities for consumption.

Degas' unique depiction of working dancers, inwardly focused, is so very different from depictions of the same type by other artists in his era that, I believe, it would have had to be a conscious decision on his part to veer away from the stereotypical portrayals of working women that dominated the works of nineteenth-century Impressionist artists with whom Degas often joined in exhibitions. Degas' works were more steeped in the Realist tradition of art, which focused on representing scenes without embellishment or prejudice. As Gabriel Weisberg argues, "...his continued focus on urban types who often could not escape their traumatic circumstances made Degas a prime motivator for naturalism within

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, trans. Mina Curtiss. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 24.

the Impressionist movement.”<sup>7</sup> Degas used keen observation to depict his world of dancers and draw attention to its complexities. Degas’ artistic devices: the awkward positions, distorted faces, and dehumanizing ambiguity, are what led critics like Mantz and Huysmans to label his work as misogynistic and misanthropic. It can be argued, however, that this was a genuine effort by the artist to show the women less as goods available for the consumption of male viewers and more as women of difficult circumstances and limited choices trying to eke out a living in a profession and a society where beauty is admired above all:

It is almost common place that Degas had a peculiar hatred of women. Yet on the other hand, no one loved women as he did; but a kind of shame or modesty in which there was something like fear, kept him away from them. It is this prudish trait in nature which explains in part the sort of cruelty which often led him to depict women at the most intimate moments...<sup>8</sup>

The literature on Degas is vast and constantly evolving. In the mid-eighties Eunice Lipton argued that, while the work of Degas is rife with the struggles of life in nineteenth-century France (i.e. issues of gender, class, and sexuality), it was an unintentional and inevitable happenstance. In the early nineties, Hollis Clayson, seems to argue that Degas (and fellow artists Renoir and Manet) plays on the myth of working women and hint at the erotic:

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<sup>7</sup> Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Beyond Impressionism the Naturalist Impulse* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 58. Gabriel Weisberg has also shown Degas’ connection to the Naturalist movement and its focus upon the working poor.

<sup>8</sup> Ambroise Vollard, *Degas: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Crown Publishers, 1927), 34.

At first viewing, this modernist strategy appears to have acknowledged the ambiguities of public identity that had resulted from the increase in and changing character of clandestine prostitution— the boulevard café, the millinery shop, the brasserie, the nightclub— or situations that suggested uncertainty, the avant-garde actually reinforced reductive female stereotypes and exacerbated the commodification of public female identity that prostitution epitomized.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, Tamar Garb has proposed that Degas' dance series is founded on a devotion to Realist art theory, rather than social context.

What was new in late nineteenth-century France was the attempt to show life as it was, without inviting sympathy, empathy, or moral instruction. The mere act of 'truthful' representation, 'authentic' self-expression, and 'impartial' recording accrued ethical connotations in the prevailing context of positivism, empiricism, and the new scientism. It was not necessary to convert, persuade, or even move the viewer: realists were instead required to reveal and record actual social relations via the description and depiction of their principal protagonists and the scenes they occupied...The sexually available, partially clothed, commodified corpus of the working woman— whether dressed in the guise of prostitute, dancer, or demi-modaine— functioned as the crucial representational topos of modernity because it could appear to demonstrate impartial modern methods of transcription (realism's alibi) at the same time that it embodied the carnal materiality of modern metropolitan life.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that Degas' intentions fall somewhere in between these ideologies. I hope to show that Degas was an artist both conscious of and sympathetic to the circumstances of the working women he depicted. In the first chapter, I will look at the social context of Degas and his works using historical data from the nineteenth century, including

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<sup>9</sup> Clayson, 152.

<sup>10</sup> Tamar Garb, *The Body in Time Figures of Femininity in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas; Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 4.

information on class, gender roles, wages, and leisure activities in France during the time. To further this discussion, the second chapter will look at the Paris Opera, the setting for many of Degas' dance pieces, as well as the circumstances, financial and social, of both those who worked at the Opera and those who frequented the Opera. The concluding chapter will direct these questions toward an in-depth analysis of Degas' ballet images and place Degas' work in relation to other artists of his day working with similar subject matter.

CHAPTER 2  
SETTING THE STAGE: POLITICS, CULTURE, AND GENDER ROLES  
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

Degas, like many other Impressionist and Realist artists, was devoted to representing the experiences of modern life. While there was still a demand for commissioned historical paintings, many artists were exploring new artistic techniques and drawing inspiration from the working-class people around them. Paris in the nineteenth century was a new world for its inhabitants. The industrial age marked vast changes in lifestyle not only for city dwellers, but also for rural French citizens. In the city, we see the rapid rise of the bourgeoisie, or middle-class. This group benefited greatly under the new regime that touted egalitarian principles and a lessened importance on nobility. Also, to a lesser extent, the bourgeoisie benefited from the mechanization of the work process and found themselves with more time (and money) for leisurely pursuits. The upper echelons of Parisian society, the nobility and the bourgeoisie, became consumers not only of goods, but also of experiences.<sup>1</sup> Many inhabitants of the French countryside, however, were finding it harder and harder to earn a living off the land. The new jobs created by the growth of

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading see Clark or Benjamin.

factories and commercial enterprises in the city centers held the promise of sustainable wages. This led to an exodus of peasants from the countryside into the city in hopes of finding employment. These two strikingly different outcomes to the Industrial Revolution led to the stratified Parisian society that Degas would spend most of his life chronicling.

The Paris of the late nineteenth century was made for the bourgeoisie, both figuratively and literally. Under the direction of Baron Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine and head of the Service d'Architecture, the city changed drastically.<sup>2</sup> Much of what remained from the Middle Ages was torn down. Streets were given order, grand boulevards were created, and factories were moved to the periphery of the city. A pamphlet of 1850 summed up the process that would come to be known as Haussmannization:

As a result of the transformation of the old Paris, the opening of new streets, the widening of narrow ones, the high price of land, the extension of commerce and industry, with the old slums giving way each day to apartment houses, vast stores and workshops, the poor and the working population finds itself, and will find itself more and more, forced out to the extremities of Paris; which means that the centre is destined to be inhabited in future only by the well-to-do.<sup>3</sup>

The changes wrought by Haussmann mark a turning point where the lives of the middle-class became more public. Under Haussmannization the streets were widened and became regimented lines yielding a one-point perspective. As leisure activities for the bourgeoisie moved away from the house and the church, commercial enterprises, such as the Opéra,

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<sup>2</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>3</sup> L. Marie, *De la decentralization des Halles*; cited by Clark, p. 33.

the race tracks, and café culture came to prominence.<sup>4</sup> The city's streets were now a place to see and be seen. Paris became a spectacle and a place of spectacle.

This desire for new goods and experiences among the bourgeoisie fueled the economy of nineteenth-century Paris. The textile industry thrived with the demand for high-fashioned clothing with lace and embroidery. Elaborate hats embellished with ribbons and feathers were purchased. Homes were staffed with domestic servants who cooked, cleaned, and ran errands. Linens were sent out to be laundered or mended. These tasks were often fulfilled by young women newly arrived in Paris from the countryside. These women made up the majority of migrant workers in nineteenth-century Paris and because they were far from home with little or no support and lacked any social power, they were vulnerable to a variety of misfortunes.<sup>5</sup>

Though the bourgeois lifestyle relied heavily on service workers, very little consideration was given to the working-class Parisians who filled these roles. Many times, the pay for these positions did not allow for subsistence. Also, conditions for live-in domestic servants were often sub-par, and even dangerous as these workers were very vulnerable to sexual violence from other domestic servants and members of the employer's household.<sup>6</sup> The women who filled these roles and others— barmaid, dancer, etc. — were thought to be of questionable morals and virtue (and that thought has not changed much in

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Rachel G. Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch, "Pregnant, Single and Far from Home: Migrant Women in Nineteenth-Century Paris." *The American Historical Review*, 95, no. 4 (Oct. 1990): 1008.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 1019.

our own time). This belief was perpetuated by contemporary sources such as fine art and literature of the day, however, much of this art and literature are the work of the very members of the leisure class who frequented the operas, the bars and the cabarets.

Few of these service positions paid a livable wage and the women had very limited alternatives for survival. “The three principle means of overcoming a life-threatening shortfall of money were prostitution, cohabitation with a man, and suicide.”<sup>7</sup> The laws of the day contributed greatly to the circumstances of these women. It was often beyond the means of a working class couple to get married, as women had to travel home to obtain documents of parental consent.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, laws regarding male adultery were shockingly lax and there were little or no consequences for men who sought sexual relations outside of marriage. These facts of life often led struggling women into clandestine prostitution.<sup>9</sup> The men of means in the bourgeoisie preyed on these starving, desolate women. There was a very strong sense of entitlement among many in this group because these men were protected under the law by their wealth, social position, and status.

Conversely, the bourgeois rarely set their hearts on women in their own circle; in half of the cases they preferred a worker or a servant, and in a third of them, a shopkeeper or an employee. In short, they had their fun with women below themselves, which

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<sup>7</sup> Clayson, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Fuchs, 1018.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Sheon, “Octave Tassaert’s ‘Le Suicide’: Early Realism and the Plight of Women,” *Arts Magazine*, 55, no. 9 (May, 1981):147. Clandestine prostitution was seen as something a bit different from “regular” prostitution. The term is used for women who had other legitimate occupations, but were unable to be consistently self-supporting. They would enter into surreptitious encounters for the immediate payment it offered and not do so again until they were once more in dire circumstances, such as having gone days without food or heat.

led some of them to mix contempt for the easy and ordinary woman with feminine inferiority and social subordination.<sup>10</sup>

Quite a few artists were taking notice of these injustices. Octave Tassaert was an early Realist artist who produced dark genre scenes. He chronicled the experiences of working women in his most popular works, including *Le Suicide* (Figure 5). Tassaert's circumstances were vastly different than most other artists who depicted Parisian life in the nineteenth century. He came from an impoverished working-class artistic family and received little in the way of formal education during his childhood.<sup>11</sup> He began earning a living at age twelve as an engraver's apprentice and eventually would go on to enroll at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Tassaert struggled financially throughout his life. He was a single father of an illegitimate child and subsisted on sporadic graphic design work and portrait commissions. He lived in rough conditions among the seamstresses, milliners, and prostitutes whom he depicted. Tassaert was also known to have suffered from alcoholism and a host of medical conditions associated with that illness. He could regularly be found at the neighborhood taverns, "where he enjoyed singing with the workers who gathered there after hours."<sup>12</sup>

Another striking facet differentiating Tassaert from the later Impressionist artists was that he was a devout Catholic and incorporated his faith and his beliefs into his works,

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<sup>10</sup> Anne-Marie Sohn, "The Golden Age of Male Adultery: The Third Republic," *Journal of Social History*, 28, no. 3 (Spring, 1995): 474.

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Weisberg, *The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing, 1830-1900*. (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art distributed by Indiana University Press, 1980). 310.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

which was notable because at the peak of Tassaert's career there was much discord among the Church, the State, and the faithful about the condition of the working class in France.<sup>13</sup> Much of this debate centered on suicide: its causes and consequences.

By the mid-nineteenth century, medical professionals and state officials began taking note of the rise in suicide rates, especially among women and children in the working class. There was also a rise in the numbers of infanticides, as well as an increase in insanity presenting among the city's residents.<sup>14</sup> In 1848, the state commissioned a survey of the working class, Le Enquête, to get a better understanding of the circumstances of workers. This was a follow-up to the Enquête of 1840, which the newly installed government found to be lacking.<sup>15</sup> The findings of the later Enquête revealed that a prevailing sense of hopelessness was evident in many of those surveyed. Many citizens were unable to provide themselves and their families with the basic needs of life. Often, it was necessary for family members to move away from the homestead in search of gainful employment. This resulted in many young people being far from home, without a support system and vulnerable to misfortunes, such as depression, violence, and exploitation.

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<sup>13</sup> Lamennais, Félicité Robert de, *Paroles d'un Croyant*. (Bruxelles: Société Belge de Librairie, 1838). Sheon, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>15</sup> The administrators of the 1840 Enquête stated that the true cause for the citizen's unhappiness was an increased immorality that manifested in substance abuse, depression, criminal behavior, and insanity. They believed that this immorality stemmed from the rapid industrialization of the country and the decreased emphasis on religion. They were unwilling to acknowledge the increasing stratification of modern society and the inability of rural workers and poor city inhabitants to earn enough money to provide for the necessities of life. Sheon, 143.

*Le Suicide*, 1849, also known as *Une Famille Pauvre*, is a dark genre painting that shows a mother and daughter in the act of committing suicide by asphyxiation. In the tableau we see two females in the center of the painting; the older woman is seated with the younger woman slumped over her lap. They are shown in a decrepit attic room with sparse furnishings. We see snow on the roofs outside the window, indicating that the scene takes place during the cold winter months. Immediately to the left of the two figures are fabric and needles placed on a table; the tools of their trade, identifying the women as seamstresses. Below this table we see the coal braiser, which will lead to their eventual deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning. In the top right corner of the painting, we see the room's only decoration, a painting of the Madonna and child. The mother gazes up at his painting as she draws her last breaths.

We know that this work of Tassaert's is rife with political and religious subtext. In the catalog that accompanied this work in the exhibition of 1851, he included an excerpt from Paroles d'un croyant (1838), which was written by Félicité Robert de Lamennais, an outspoken reformer of the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> Tassaert was the perfect artist to chronicle this little-seen world of the impoverished because he shared the same conditions as the people he painted. Tassaert knew intimately the struggle and misery the poor faced and at the age of 74, with his sight failing him, he chose to end his life. Tassaert provides invaluable insight into the condition of the working poor. Though his technical proficiency and conventional artistic devices kept him from securing a place among renowned artists of his

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<sup>16</sup> Sheon, 143.

time, his concern for social issues was shared by a number of other artists of his time, most notably Honoré Daumier.

Daumier was an extraordinarily prolific artist whose prints and paintings often portrayed the lives of the working poor.<sup>17</sup> He was an artist with political leanings similar to Tassaert, and it is known that Degas collected his works. Daumier is an artist who drew the viewer in as an engaged observer to the social consequences of the Industrial Age through a variety of means, including a series of paintings chronicling railway travel. In his painting, *The Third-Class Carriage* of 1863-65 (Figure 6), the central figures are a grouping of four obviously lower-class figures: two women, a small boy and a swaddled baby seated in a crowded railway car. Their clothing appears worn and rumpled and a great sense of weariness exudes from the figures.<sup>18</sup> Behind the figures we see men in top hats, possibly house servants, and other similarly dressed women crowded into the carriage. The colors scheme used in the painting makes the railway car appear dark and dreary though light from the windows streams into the car. Daumier has highlighted the two women with an unidentifiable light source that casts their faces into shadow, making their features appear heavy, gaunt and haggard. The overall effect is a very bleak scene, broken only by the vibrant shade of blue Daumier uses to render the old woman's dress. The painting has been described as, "...representing 'a comprehensive summary of human life, with all its miseries

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<sup>17</sup> For further reading on Daumier see National Gallery of Canada and McCauley.

<sup>18</sup> The painting has been described as, "...'a comprehensive summary of human life, with all its miseries and blemishes, thwarted joys and excruciating trials that force one to a fatalistic resignation' — a universal image of poverty in the industrial age." National Gallery of Canada, *Daumier 1808-1879* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1999), 425.

and blemishes, thwarted joys and excruciating trials that force one to a fatalistic resignation’— a universal image of poverty in the industrial age.”

The composition of this painting was first seen as part of a series of watercolors that the artist was commissioned to paint for a railroad baron, and Daumier would chose to repaint this scene at least a half dozen times.<sup>19</sup> While Daumier has a great many other paintings that more implicitly depict the travails of the working class, I believe that this piece is of significant importance because it can be contrasted with the other two works in the series, *The First Class Carriage* (Figure 7) and *The Second Class Carriage* (Figure 8). By contrasting these three works, one can really see some of the societal stratification that was common place in nineteenth century France. In the first two works of the series, Daumier used a very neutral color palette— the works are done in an almost gray scale. In *The First Class Carriage*, we see members of the leisure class enjoying their travels in comfort. The four figures, two men and two women fill the majority of the picture plane rendered in a sketchy manner. They are all dressed in fashionable travel clothes—the women in stylish dresses, overcoats, and bonnets, the men in suits, overcoats, and hats. Sunlight coming in from the windows brightens what appears to be in a private car. The four figures seem somewhat self-contained, one of the women reads a newspaper, the man sitting next to her looks forward with a bemused simile on his face, and the two figures on the end appear to take in the sights passing outside of the rail car. In *The Second Class Carriage*, we again see a grouping of four figures, this time three men and a woman. The figures fill the lower two-

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<sup>19</sup> Penn. Museum of Art Daumier 424-428

thirds of the picture plane and are shown slumped on the bench of their railway car, which appears to be a bit less comfortable than that of *The First Class Carriage*. The four passengers are well-dressed, their clothing in good repair, the woman quite fashionable with fur muff and an elaborate bow at her throat. However, the cold permeating the car has necessitated the addition of utilitarian hats, scarves, and lap blankets.

Daumier has used obvious artistic devices to depict the three different classes. The first is color— each work gets progressively darker and drearier. Secondly, the figures are gradually relegated to smaller sections of the picture plane, possibly symbolic of their status and power in society. Lastly, the rendering of the figures faces grows noticeably heavier from *The First Class Carriage* to *the Third Class Carriage*, indicating Daumier's use of physiognomy, attributing certain facial characteristics with someone's personality or social status. This is an art technique with which Daumier was well acquainted through his work as a newspaper political cartoonist.<sup>20</sup> In *The First Class Carriage*, the passengers have very patrician, noses, arching eyebrows, bright unblemished skin, and golden hair. The figures in *The Second Class Carriage* have slightly broader, droopier features and lined skin. The women in *The Third Class Carriage* have the harshest features, yet Daumier renders them with a stoic dignity. This is the only painting of the series where one of the figures looks outside the picture plane and meets the viewer's eye. "Mean and trivial and humble, things

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<sup>20</sup> J.R. Kist, *Daumier: Eyewitness of an Epoch*. Translated by Mary Charles. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1976), 7.

take on a luster and significance under his creating hand, reshaped in forms of dignity and permanence.”<sup>21</sup>

Tassaert and Daumier’s work provides us with great insight into the French working-class and into the artistic devices used in the pieces we will see later from Degas. Their works show that the plight of working-class, especially women of the working-class, was known by those who lived amongst them and interacted with them. Both artists show a social consciousness in their renderings and a desire to represent the working poor with dignity and veracity. Their art pieces share some of the characteristics that we will see in Degas’ works depicting the similar population— a removal of the figures from the spaces familiar to the public, the use of a liberal realism interpreted by the artist through physiognomy and multiple perspectives, as well as figures that are very internally focused and regally depicted.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Artine Artinian and Margaret Woodbridge Artinian, “Daumier and L’Esprit Français” *The French Review*, 12, No. 1 (Oct. 1938), 43.

<sup>22</sup> Realist art was intent on revealing the truth of the subject and this was not always the truth as seen by the eye, but the true nature of a subject.

## CHAPTER 3

### ALL THAT GLITTERS: LIFE AT THE PARIS OPÉRA

A key characteristic of Degas' representation of working women is his choice of site— and one of the key settings for his dancers was the Paris Opera. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to have some knowledge of this institution. Degas is most known for his prolific depictions of ballet dancers and he spent most of his career studying and rendering the movements and machinations of the Opera. In his works, we get an historical record of the workings of the opera with details about the building, the dance masters, the dancers, the musicians, and even the audience that attended these nightly performances. Though many of the pieces done by Degas were drawn or painted from memory and, sometimes, composed from a compilation of different scenes or occurrences, these works are a telling fragment of nineteenth-century Paris life. However, prior to his interest in the dance, Degas created many works centering on the race tracks. Horse breeding and racing, was a very elite endeavor in the mid-1800s. The action on the race tracks was overseen by members of the prestigious Société d'Encouragement pour l'Amélioration des Races de Chevaux en France.<sup>1</sup> The gentlemen of this society, better known as the Jockey Club, were

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<sup>1</sup> Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*. (California: University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987) 41.

the tastemakers in Parisian society. In working on his racing series, which constitutes his second largest body of work, Degas would befriend members of the Jockey Club who would eventually help him to gain privileged access to the opera.<sup>2</sup> Without this entrée, even someone of Degas' privileged background would not have been admitted to the inner workings of the opera.

The Opera was a major cultural institution in Paris during the nineteenth century. The budget was subsidized by the French government and laws were enacted that dictated such things from theater governance of the opera, to who could purchase season tickets.<sup>3</sup> Opera patrons would attend performances that were from three to six acts long as often as four nights a week throughout the year.<sup>4</sup> During this time, Opera and ballet were not considered separate entities due to a legislative enactment of 1806-1807 that aimed to minimize the overlap of theatrical forms and institutions.<sup>5</sup> This dictate necessitated the creation of a new kind of opera that would accompany the ballet and around 1830, the *petite opéra* came to popularity.<sup>6</sup> These new opera performances had shorter acts and incorporated more ballet. It was seen as lighter fare and attracted not only the upper-class

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the patrons of the Opera were also known to be members of the Jockey Club. It was very common place to see its members in the dance studios, rehearsal halls, and backstage at the Opera. The Jockey Club was closely connected with the Opera— they moved their headquarters to the Rue Scribe in 1863. This street intersected with the Boulevard des Capucines, where the new Paris Opera was under construction. Lipton, 41-45. Also see DeVonyar for further reading.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Huebner, "Opera Audiences in Paris 1830-1870," *Music & Letters*, 70, no. 2 (May, 1989): 215.

<sup>4</sup> Huebner, Steven. "Opera Audiences in Paris 1830-1870," *Music & Letters*, 70, no. 2 (May, 1989): 207.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Everist, "*Grand Opéra—Petit Opéra Parisian Opera and Ballet from the Restoration to the Second Empire*," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, 33, no. 3 (Spring, 2010): 197.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

members of society, but also the middle-class. Beginning in the mid 1800's more and more of these lighter operas were brought to the stage.

For many years, the Paris Opéra was in transition, frequently moving to different dance halls and auditoriums. The Opera occupied no less than a dozen structures between the late 1600s and the late 1800s.<sup>7</sup> It wasn't until the urban revitalization, led by Baron Haussmann, that the Opera received a permanent home. This structure, which would come to be known as the Opéra Garnier or the Palais Garnier after its designer Charles Garnier, was a focal point for an entire quarter of the capital of Second Empire France.<sup>8</sup> The story of its inception is an interesting one, culminating in a design contest won by a then unknown Beaux-Art trained architect.<sup>9</sup> The plan was for a building on a grand scale, one appropriately suited to the scenes of spectacle taking place inside its walls and one which would inspire awe in those attending the performances.

Much thought was given to the site location for this new Opera. For years, council debate focused on which quartier of Paris would house this structure. Eventually, it was decided that the new opera house would be placed in the ninth arrondissement along the Boulevard des Capucines.<sup>10</sup> The site location was selected largely because of its desirable

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<sup>7</sup> Béatrice De Andia and Géraldine Rideau. *Paris et ses Théâtres: Architecture et Décor*. (Paris: Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1998), 92

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Mead, "Urban Contingency and the Problem of Representation in Second Empire Paris," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 54, no. 2 (Jun., 1995): 138.

<sup>9</sup> For further reading on the design, construction, and decoration of the Paris Opéra, see Charles Garnier, *Le Nouvel Opéra de Paris* (Paris: Douchet, 1878).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Curtis Mead, *Charles Garnier's Paris Opera: Architectural Empathy and the Renaissance of French Classicism*. (New York: Architectural History Foundation and The MIT Press, 1991), 56.

placement among the fashionable cafés and theatres. In planning for the design of the building, the ambition was for a structure that would mesh well with the atmosphere of grandeur and spectacle that permeated the district. This sense of flânerie, seeking out the gaze of others, was what allowed the boulevards and their commercial and cultural institutions to thrive and the planners of the opera wanted to draw in just this type of clientele.

In 1861, the plan submitted by Charles Garnier was selected as the winner of a very competitive design competition. After years of construction, the new Paris Opera (Figure 9) was inaugurated in 1875. The final structure was a lavish building in the Beaux-Arts style. Everything was created on a monumental scale— from the buildings façade, to its stage, to its décor- the building's intent was to impress. When studying the structure, its elements can be really be divided into four sections: the exterior, the foyers and galleries, the grand staircase, and the stage.

The new opera house is a large building, but it is slightly smaller than its predecessor, the Opéra Peletier, which had been destroyed by fire. The Palais Garnier relies on its monumental design scheme to provide the sense of grandeur; much consideration was given to how people would interact with the building while attending a performance. The front façade was designed to accommodate the arrival of theater patrons in fashionable carriages and those arriving on foot with covered porticos that shielded them from the elements. Upon entering, theater patrons would navigate through vestibules designed to impede the flow of cold air and allow patrons to remove their outerwear. Patrons were then met with the grand staircase (Figure 10) that spanned two stories and embodied the

feeling of spectacle present in the building. “Au moment de l’entracte, le public s’affaire à différentes occupations. Une partie quitte la salle pour aller admirer le spectacle qu’offre l’animation du grand escalier.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout the theater, there were a number of sitting rooms and galleries designed for conversation and for observing patrons in attendance. It was very common for theater patrons to take their seats for the evening’s performance as late as two hours after the curtain rose.<sup>12</sup> For theater patrons, as much of the evening’s entertainment happened in these salons as on the theater stage.

The final prominent design element of the Palais Garnier is the backstage area, and, for the purposes of this study, of particular note is the inclusion and design of several spaces that would never be seen by the general audience members, such as the wings of the stage and the Foyer de la Danse (Figure 11). These private areas quickly came to be associated with seedy happenings through the works of authors and painters of the day. Degas frequently depicted his dancers in these little seen areas and the connotations of the scenes would have been evident to contemporary viewers.

As evidenced above, attending the opera was primarily a social occasion for most of its patrons. Seeing and being seen was of greater importance than music appreciation, a fact that is evidenced in many ways. First, there was a dearth of material available for performances. Audience members with annual subscriptions were likely to see the same performance four or more times in a year.<sup>13</sup> Second, the architecture of the Palais Garnier

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<sup>11</sup> Béatrice De Andia and Géraldine Rideau. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Huebner, 209.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

was set up in such a way as to put the audience on display in box seats. In designing the building, particular attention was paid to the arrangement of the private boxes. Unlike the enclosed boxes of the Italian Opera, it was decided that the boxes of the Palais Garnier should have recessed walls that would allow the audience to contribute to the sense of spectacle at the performances. Now, those in the boxes were as much on display as those performing on the stage. This had a great impact on the women attending performances, since women were not allowed to sit in the orchestra section, ostensibly because the narrow seats did not allow enough room for their skirts. An evening at the Palais Garnier necessitated that the ladies take great care with their dress and appearance. When the French government attempted to force this policy on a rival theater, the director protested that, “many of his female customers took seats in the orchestra so as not to feel obliged to prepare an over-elaborate toilette— evidently a strong selling point of his enterprise.”<sup>14</sup> Lastly, the social importance of the Opera can also be evidenced by studying who was purchasing subscriptions. In the days of the ancien regime, subscriptions were primarily held by the nobility and the well-off haute bourgeoisie. In the time of Degas’ works, we can see a marked shift in patronage— shop owners and merchants are also buying tickets and subscriptions, though often they were hard pressed to afford such luxury.<sup>15</sup>

Another category of subscriber was known as the abonné. Abonnés were very wealthy patrons of the Opera who received special perks for their patronage. They were allowed in the dance studios during rehearsals and examinations. They were also allowed

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<sup>14</sup> Heubner, 210.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 213.

backstage during opera performances. They would interact with the dancers during intermissions and while the young dancers were waiting to take the stage. The abonnés played a big role on the opera scene and in popular culture of the day. Tales of the exploits of these gentlemen appeared in countless paintings, novels, and newspaper articles. For the young dancers, being under the sponsorship of a powerful abonné would have a variety of advantages. Not only did the abonné's largess provide financial security, but it could also mean securing top billing in performances.<sup>16</sup>

If the wealthy, or at least those wanting to give the appearance of wealth, made up the audience, a much different existence was true of those who performed on the stage. The audience was enchanted by the world of elegance and glamour that they witnessed during the performances. Artists of the time perpetuated this myth with images of scantily clad or even nude dancers entertaining audiences or enticing admirers. The reality of the lives of these women was much different than what was shown in popular media. In truth, the dance profession required laborious effort and immense amounts of time spent in practice studios and rehearsal halls. Dancers were left with very little free time to entertain admirers.

Of the positions open to working women and children of the time, dancing was one of the highest paying. It was also a very competitive field. Children would start out learning ballet as early as seven years old and make as much as two francs a day when appearing on the stage at opera performances; enough for one pound of meat and a half pound of

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<sup>16</sup> Claude Conyers, "Courtesans in Dance History: Les Belles de la Belle Époque," *Dance Chronicle*, 26, No. 2 (2003), 220.

butter.<sup>17</sup> By the time the child reached her early teens, if she possessed an aptitude for the ballet, she could make 1,500 francs annually.<sup>18</sup> In most cases, the children who studied dance came from poor families and hoped that a career in dance would greatly improve their circumstances. Their families were either theater families or of the working class.<sup>19</sup>

Apprenticing a child into the dance profession was also often a burden for the families. While there was not a cost for the younger children to attend the Paris Opéra Ballet School, the family did have to cover the expense of transporting the child to classes and ensuring that they had the necessary supplies to train. The average student would attend the school for six to ten years.<sup>20</sup> During those intervening years, the dance pupils would normally have a chaperone, usually the mother, who would travel with them to class at the school and attend classes, ensuring that the student was working hard at her lessons. This was often an additional burden on the family, as that meant that the mother was not able to work and provide an income to help support the family. This was particularly challenging in single mother households where it meant that the child was the only source of income for the family.

The students at the École de Danse belonged to families who relied upon their earnings for subsistence. These children were destined to become wage earners, participants in a family wage economy that required supplementation from its younger members. A student's entry into the École

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<sup>17</sup> Lipton, 90.

<sup>18</sup> John V. Chapman, "The Paris Opéra Ballet School, 1798-1827," *Dance Chronicle*, 12, no. 2 (1989), 202.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Anne Dawson, (2005). *Danseuses as Working Women: Ballet and Female Waged Labor at the Paris Opéra 1830-1860* (Doctoral Dissertation), 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

de Danse constituted a family strategy, one that promised earnings equal, if not superior, to other non-liberal professions. This was particularly true for girl students, for the Paris Opéra was perhaps the only place of mixed gender employment in which a woman's wages could surpass a man's.<sup>21</sup>

Children fortunate enough to secure a spot in the school had to work hard to avoid dismissal. They would endure rigorous training for hours a day up to six days a week, often without having the nourishment that such exertions would require.<sup>22</sup>

The life of a dancer was not an easy one. They were still required to keep up the rigorous training of their school days, as well as perform nightly on stage. The Opera season was divided into two distinct seasons—the first lasting from November until the beginning of Lent, the second starting at the end of Lent and lasting until October.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned before, there were as many as six performances a week during the season, which was taxing for the dancers. There was also great financial pressure for the dancers. For all but the most talented senior dancers, the pay was still below subsistence levels. Illness and injury were constant concerns as well. Though most dancers in the Corps de Ballet were paid an annual salary, if the dancers were not healthy, they would be unable to perform and risk lost wages or complete dismissal from the Opera.<sup>24</sup> Age was another great enemy. Then, as now, the career of a ballet dancer was not a long one. Dancers had to give great consideration to how they would support themselves and their families when they could no longer dance.

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<sup>21</sup> Dawson, 10.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on the procedures at the Paris Opera Ballet School, see Chapman.

<sup>23</sup> Dawson, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

The dancers were also faced with the constant presence of the abonnés. To some of the ballet dancers, especially those coming from impoverished circumstances, the entrée into the world of privilege and luxury that was offered by these men would have been an enticement to act as a mistress, for others, the opportunity for professional advancement would have been a lure, but for the most, the hope of security—food, shelter, and the like—would have been enough.<sup>25</sup> These men wielded great power, not only in the theater, but also in Parisian society. They were allowed unrestricted access to every aspect of the ballet, from the rehearsal studios, to the dance examinations, to the stage wings on performance nights. Their presence must have seemed ominous and unrelenting at times to the dancers, who for the most part were young girls inexperienced in such encounters.

Degas chose to paint the familiar sights of bourgeoisie life, scenes that would be nostalgic and commercially successful; however, it is important to note that Degas also chose to include references to the less glamorous side of opera life as well. His revealing scenes of life behind the curtain and in the dance studios hint at the struggles the dancers faced. Degas' work strips away the artifice that surrounded theater life and the dancers themselves and causes us to question some of the prevailing assumptions about the women who performed on the stage of the Paris Opera.

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<sup>25</sup> Conyers, 220.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEGAS AND HIS DANCERS

The genre scenes that were so popular among the fashionable bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century were so, in part, because they contributed to the sense of spectacle that was the preferred leisure activity of the day. These paintings chronicled the pastimes of the leisure class who went to exhibitions to see them. In these works, they saw the prosaic scenes of picnics and promenades that they took part in, opening nights at operas, which they attended, and the more boisterous scenes of night life at bars and cabarets. The paintings recalled memories for the viewer or allowed them to take part in experiences they otherwise would not have been able to, essentially making the viewer both spectator and participant.

In studying Degas' ballet works in relation to the realities of working women of the time, it is useful to look at three things: the setting of his pieces, the role of chaperones in the works, and the subjects themselves. These three components work in support of placing Degas' works within the context of socially conscious art. I believe that Degas uses these components to subvert the mastering gaze and draw attention to the non-sexual nature of the dancers, underscoring the challenging nature of their role in society. "Degas' pictures

neutralize the conventional erotic formulas.”<sup>1</sup> His pieces work to humanize the dancers he portrays, as well as challenge some of the prevailing notions of Parisian social life.

### The Setting

The majority of Degas’ scenes take place either in the dance studio or behind the scenes of the opera. In this, Degas is granting viewers access to a part of the opera that would normally be off-limits. Very rarely were patrons allowed in the rehearsal studios and only the wealthiest of patrons would have been allowed backstage or in the wings during a performance. For many of these wealthy patrons, there was a sense of propriety and entitlement in their access to these backstage areas and to the dancers themselves. This contributed greatly to society’s negative perception of the dancers and theater life.<sup>2</sup> In *L’Etoile*, 1875 (Figure 2), Degas illustrates this phenomenon.

*L’Etoile*, depicts a performance on the stage of the Opéra. The central figure is a ballet dancer placed in the lower right corner of the painting. She is in full costume, consisting of a cream colored leotard and tutu and adorned with bright flowers on her low-cut bodice and headdress. She is posed on one leg, graceful and theatrical. The lower picture plane is filled with the floorboards of the stage. We can also see a common characteristic of Degas’ dance works in this painting— the sloping floor. It is often debated whether this is a compositional technique that he’s using or an acknowledgment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Collins. “Review: Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life by Eunice Lipton.” 39.

<sup>2</sup> Lipton, 82.

angled or “raked” opera stage that allowed the audience to better see the action on stage.<sup>3</sup> Occupying the upper half of the painting, we see the vibrant props of the opera, brushes of color representing foliage and sky. Mixed in with the stage set we see the legs of three dancers waiting in the wings to make their entrance— the various contortions of their legs and feet suggesting that they are practicing their steps as they wait. In the wings immediately to the left of the dancer, we see three-quarters of a well-dressed man intently watching the dancer. The man’s face has been rendered with just a flat plane of pale color, lending a menacing aura to the observer.

This scene that Degas shows us is a clever mix of the public and private. While the eyes of the audience would have been intently focused on the dancer on the stage, the action taking place in the wings would not have been visible to them. Degas revels at exposing this artifice. The movements of the dancer on the stage appear effortless, but the skill and discipline necessary to achieve that appearance of effortlessness are belied by the dancers in the wings preparing to take their place on stage. The romantic (erotic?) notion of the dancer as willing paramour of wealthy men falters under the ominous presence of the man who, clearly, does not belong in that space. At first glance, the viewer of this work is taken by the grace of the dancer and the beauty of what the scene represents of the opera, but under closer scrutiny, an eerie, intimidating quality emerges.

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<sup>3</sup> Lipton, 76. Many stage floors, usually in theatres built for dance or variety, are higher at the back than at the front, to give the audience a better view. These stages are said to be “raked”, and the “rake” is the angle of slope from back to front. In most modern theatres it is the audience seating that is raked, not the stage. <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/otherresources/glossary/glossps.htm>

Degas' painting, *Dancer Leaving her Dressing Room*, 1881 (Figure 12), also underscores this division of public and private spaces and the trepidation the dancers faced in navigating between the two. A dancer is framed in the threshold of her dressing room door. She is obviously dressed for a performance in her elaborate ensemble embellished with beads and lace. She hesitates in the doorway, looking down at the ground before her, as if uncertain of or resigned to leaving her dressing room. Behind her, we see her brightly lit dressing room and perhaps the shadow of her chaperone or companion. Beyond the dressing room is the shadowy hall that would lead her to the stage. Again, we see the sloping floors common in Degas' paintings. This skewed perspective makes it appear as though there is a drop-off between the dressing room door and the hallway, highlighting the sense that the dancer truly stands on the precipice of uncertainty and danger.

### Chaperones

Another key component of Degas' work, placing it in the realm of socially conscious art, is the presence of a mediating figure in his paintings. A little known fact regarding the world of ballet dancers is that most of the young dancers would have had a chaperone who accompanied them to rehearsals and performances. These chaperones would have worked to keep lecherous attention of male patrons away from their charges; or, in some cases, the chaperone may also have worked to secure the most advantageous liaison for their charge. The presence of these chaperones would not have been common knowledge to anyone except those very familiar with the workings of the Opera and Degas is almost singular in his referencing of the chaperones. Degas includes chaperones in many of his works, in some

instances even highlighting the inclusion by placing the chaperones in more prominent positions than the dancers, drawing the viewer's eye to their presence. Such is the case in his painting *The Ballet Class*, c. 1880 (Figure 3).

In *The Ballet Class*, the central figure of the painting is a seated woman reading a newspaper. She is centered in the lower half of the painting, rendered in profile, and completely engrossed in the paper she is reading. The scene takes place in a dance studio filled with young ballet dancers practicing their steps under the watchful eye of their dance master. The woman, likely a mother of one of the ballet students, acts as a visual barrier to the gaze of the painting's viewer. I believe that this was an intentional barrier placed by Degas that is reinforced by his use of perspective. The entire painting seems to be just a bit off kilter. The floor of the dance studio seems to slope downward drawing the viewer's eye to the seated woman at the bottom of the painting. Though the chaperone in this painting is less than vigilant, that would not have been the case for chaperones on the night of a performance when abonnés would freely roam the foyer where dancers waited to be called to the stage.<sup>4</sup>

However, these chaperones could not be with their charges at all times— they were not afforded the same unrestricted access to the Opera that the wealthy subscribers were allowed. While waiting in the wings of the stage, the dancer would be left to fend for herself. Such is the case in Degas' painting *Dancers Backstage* (Figure 13). Here, we see an interaction between a dancer and an abonné on the night of a performance. The two

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<sup>4</sup> Lipton, 84.

central figures fill the bottom left corner of the painting. Slightly off-center, the ballet dancer stands dressed in an ornate pink costume with a full tutu embellished with flowers. Her facial features are obscured and delineated only by her heavy stage make-up. The dancer's eyes are cast downward and her arms are crossed protectively over her midsection. Behind her stands an abonné, dressed in evening attire and top hat. The rest of the painting is filled with the lush green scenery of the stage set and a small section of the stage that holds a similarly dressed ballerina with her back to the viewer. Art historian Annette Dixon describes the work as such:

*Dancers Backstage* is a sketchy oil in which Degas addresses the interaction between the dancer and the abonné...There is an intriguing psychological tension between the two figures. Although the man's face is in shadow, we can clearly tell that the dancer is the object of his attention. Her downward look and crossed forearms reveal that she has noticed her admirer; she may be feigning lack of interest.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that this is a very telling interpretation of the interaction between the dancer and the subscriber. Dixon's conclusion is that even though the body language of the dancer depicted by Degas points to the abonné's attention being unwanted; Dixon sees this as a false emotion meant to entice the solicitor to greater desire. I believe that an equally plausible explanation is that this scene highlights the vulnerability of ballet dancers to unwanted advances from the powerful subscribers and the dancers inability to change the situation.

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Dixon, *The Dancer: Degas, Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec*. (Oregon: The Portland Art Museum: distributed by University of Washington Press, 2008): 60.

## The Dancers

In Degas' paintings, his representations of the dancers themselves also act to subvert the viewer's gaze. Degas often depicts them turned away or at various angles to the viewer, as well as in awkward positions that distract from the grace and sensuality that was usually associated with dancers of the time. Frequently, Degas chose to only use rudimentary detailing for their faces or creates a countenance that is plain, verging on unattractive. However, his dancers are always shown as dancers, with all that it entails (discipline, concentration, concern for their craft). Degas' figures are free from overt sexual connotations. This is very much in opposition to the depictions of dancers from other artists of the time, such as Toulouse-Lautrec, who, like Degas, was an avid chronicler of the entertainment venues available to Paris residents.

Contrasting *Waiting*, c. 1882 (Figure 14), by Degas with *Seated Dancer in Pink Tights* (Figure 15), 1889, by Toulouse-Lautrec, one can see the different emphasis each artist puts on the similar subject matter. The two works each depict a dancer that is very internally focused; the women appear absorbed in their own thoughts. They are both rendered in a sparse, sketchy style, with Degas' being the more detailed of the two. From here, the two works diverge. Toulouse-Lautrec's ballerina takes up the majority of the picture plane, while Degas' ballerina is contained in half the picture plane and shares the space with her chaperone. The dancers are dressed similarly in both works, but the different poses of the dancers is what is most striking. Degas has made his dancer very self-contained. She bends at the waist to adjust the strap of her ballet shoe, obscuring her face and bodice from the viewer, creating a chaste and prosaic scene. In contrast, the ballerina of Toulouse-Lautrec

exudes an overt sexuality. Toulouse-Lautrec is undoubtedly best known for his risqué, sexually imbued works (and life). *Seated Dancer in Pink Tights* is one of his more subdued pieces, yet still has much in common with his works depicting cabaret dancers and even prostitutes. There is an undercurrent of sexuality that runs throughout the work. His ballerina is featured sitting forward with her forearms on her thighs, accentuating her décolletage. Her tutu is hitched up to reveal a good portion of her thighs. Her face is obviously made up with rouged lips and shadowed eyes; her expression world-weary.

Even when comparing Degas' works to nineteenth-century genre scenes that are more sexually neutral, a clear distinction can still be made. Many nineteenth-century artists sought out the viewer's gaze with their compositions; however, Degas' pieces actively subvert it. When discussing the concept of the gaze in art, Édouard Manet is an artist who springs immediately to mind. Both a contemporary and friend to Degas, the two had very different takes on their artistic endeavors. Even early in their friendship it appears that Manet was drawn to Degas the man rather than Degas the artist.<sup>6</sup> Though they exhibited at many of the same salons and painted similar subjects, their handling of the subject matter was completely different. Manet's women seem to be put on display for the male viewer.

When compared with the works of Manet, a clear distinction can be made concerning the depictions of women in his works and those in Degas' dance series. In Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* of 1881-1882 (Figure 16), Manet exposed the viewer to multiple sides of cabaret life. In his painting we see a woman gazing out of the picture

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<sup>6</sup> John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; Greenwich, Conn.: distributed by New York Graphic Society, 1973): 60.

plane, boldly meeting the viewer's eye. She is portrayed as a barmaid, yet makes no gesture to indicate she is engaged in the work of that profession. She is positioned behind the bar at the famed Folies-Bergère, a location which would have been just as immediately identifiable to those viewing the painting as Degas depictions of the Paris Opera. The barmaid is dressed well in a stylish dress and black jacket, her ears, neck and wrist are adorned with jewelry. She leans slightly forward, hands placed on the bar. Her figure appears to mimic the bottles of champagne and spirits placed around her, alluding to her availability as a good to be purchased by patrons of the bar. Also, Manet has chosen to place a bowl of ripe fruit, just to her left and a flower in bloom next to it, both of which are common symbols connoting sexuality. In the mirror behind the barmaid, we are able to glimpse the spectacle of the bustling bar.<sup>7</sup> Manet has rendered for us a scene of commerce in all aspects, the bar, the barmaid, and even the Folies-Bergère itself. "...the barmaid is a salesgirl and the situation at hand primarily a sales transaction of the goods on the counter..."<sup>8</sup> The barmaid meets the viewer's eye with a hard, somewhat resigned, direct stare. This, again, is very much in contrast to Degas' representation of his female figures.

Degas was an artist obsessed with depicting the movements and motions of the human (female) body. He created study after study of the body in various angles and poses. Often, the subjects of his works are placed in awkward positions with limbs akimbo. Also, we rarely, if ever, get a fully frontal view of the subjects' faces. I believe that this is an

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<sup>7</sup> Bradford Collins, *12 Views of the Manet's Bar*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Ruth E. Iskin, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère," *The Art Bulletin*, 77, No. 1 (March, 1995), 25.

artistic device that Degas used to subvert the gaze of the viewer and to keep viewers from being able to fully interact with the paintings.

In his painting, *At the Milliner*, 1882-1885, (Figure 17) we see an excellent example of Degas' efforts to subvert the viewers' ability to gaze at the subject of the painting. The painting depicts two women in a millinery shop, a customer and a saleswoman. The customer tries on a hat in front of the large mirror positioned in front of her while the saleswoman holds a hat for her. The most intriguing aspect of this painting is that the customer has her back to the viewer, but is facing the mirror in front of her. Her face should be fully available to the viewer, but Degas has chosen to obscure the face. The customer's image is made ghostly and strange. In fact, Degas has chosen to render this figure with little detail. Her hands are extensions of color barely distinguishable from her arms. This is in contrast with the sales clerk whose hand and forearm are the only part of her body visible in the painting. Degas has chosen to over exaggerate the bone structure of her hand holding the hat. The fingers are flexed and the hand appears gnarled, perhaps a representation of the toll that millinery work took on those who spent hours weaving, beading, and threading these hats.

The painting has a voyeuristic quality, as the viewer is able to observe this moment between shop clerk and customer without the two women acknowledging the spectator. However, Degas has taken this moment (which, in the hands of another artist, might have been made lurid with a suggestive glance or a bare shoulder) and created barriers to the viewers access to the women. With this painting, Degas has invited the viewer to glimpse this private realm of women, but has not allowed the viewer unadulterated access. This is

very similar to the composition devices used in Degas dance series: the viewer is allowed privileged access to life behind the curtains, but is denied ownership of the space and its inhabitants. Lipton states, "...Degas' acts of disclosure in these paintings, the 'look' that he gave to the spectator, permits the latter to share that power [over the subject]."<sup>9</sup> However, the prevailing thought of society of the day was that the actions of women were focused on enticing or appeasing the males of society. I believe that Degas' efforts to block the viewer's interactions with the subjects of his works is an empowering act that gives ownership of that space back to the women who inhabit it.

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<sup>9</sup> Lipton, 99.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Despite the romanticized ideal of nineteenth-century dancers, history tells us that these dancers lived difficult lives, under challenging circumstances that provided them few options for survival. A survey of nineteenth-century novels would leave one with the impression of dancer as calculating, manipulative siren. In studying the works mentioned above, we see that on the surface the paintings appear to be rather lighthearted genre scenes, skillfully composed, but without much depth or meaning. I would argue that the sub-context apparent in these works is a deliberate attempt on the part of Degas to portray his subjects with a realism lacking in his contemporaries.

Degas is credited with saying, "In painting you must give the idea of the true by means of the false." By focusing his work on the dancers of the Paris Opéra, he portrayed subjects surrounded in artifice in both their work and personal lives. We see in his works a great knowledge of the inner workings of the Opéra, as well as an understanding of the daily struggles that ballet dancers faced. Degas chose to render his dancers at unobserved moments, highlighting the voyeuristic quality of the Opéra. His dancers are self-contained, never seeking the viewers gaze, but the object of it nonetheless. He brings to the fore little

known facts about these women that the lay person would be ignorant of, such as the protective presence of their chaperones and the ominous presence of the abonnés.

Although the works of Edgar Degas have generated several conflicting interpretations, I believe that his pieces deserve further consideration. By looking deeper into Degas' paintings, we begin to see an historical account of how the class and social conflicts that prevailed in nineteenth-century society affected the dancers of the Paris Opéra.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *La classe de danse (The Dancing class)*, oil on canvas, c. 1873-75, 85 x 75 cm (33 1/2 x 29 1/2 in), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

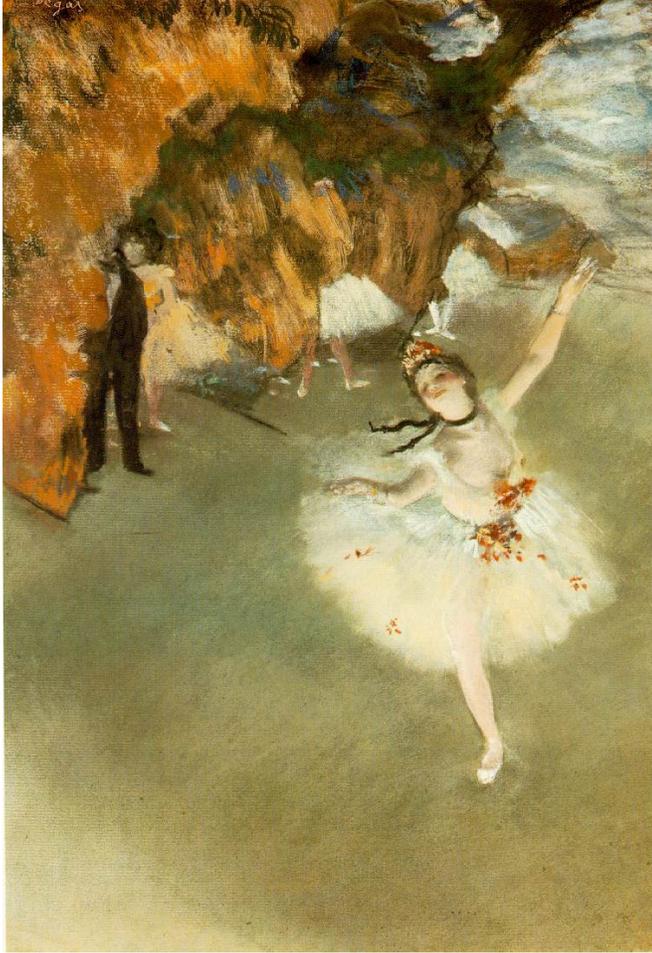


Figure 2. Edgar Degas, *L'etoile [La danseuse sur la scene] (The Star [Dancer on Stage])*, pastel on paper, 1878, 60 x 44 cm (23 5/8 x 17 3/8 in), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 3. Edgar Degas, *The Ballet Class*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 32 3/8 x 30 1/4 in (82.2 x 76.8 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 4. Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsal*, oil on canvas, c. 1873-78, 41 x 61.7 cm (18 1/2 x 24 3/8 in), Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.



Figure 5. Octave Tassaert, *Une Famille Malheureuse on le Suicide (One Family's Misfortune with Suicide)*, 1849, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France.



Figure 6. Honoré Daumier, *The Third-Class Carriage*, 1862-64, oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 35 1/2 in. (65.4 x 90.2 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 7. Honoré Daumier, *The First Class Carriage*, watercolor, ink wash and charcoal on slightly textured, moderately thick, cream wove paper, 1864, 8 1/16 x 11 13/16 in. (20.5 x 30 cm). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.



Figure 8. Honoré Daumier, *The Second Class Carriage*, watercolor, ink wash and charcoal on moderately textured, moderately thick, cream wove paper, 1864, 8 1/16 x 11 7/8 in. (20.5 x 30.1 cm), The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

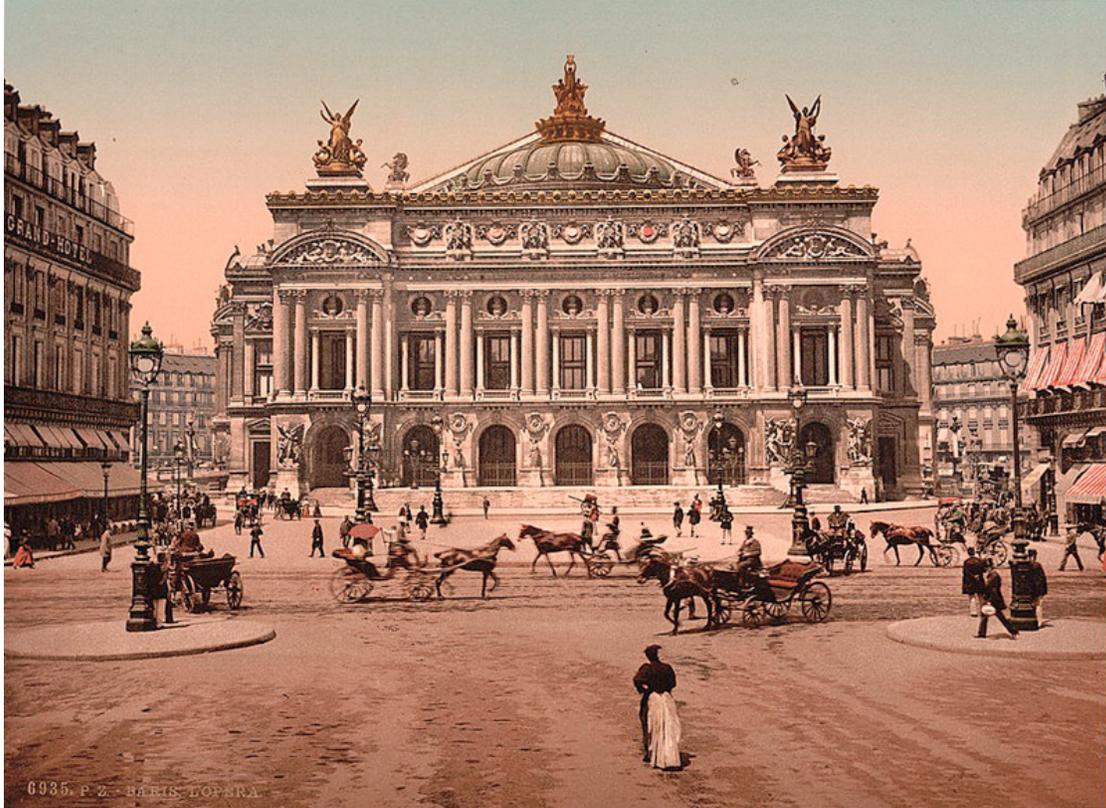


Figure 9. The Paris Opera, Paris, France, Charles Garnier 1857-1874

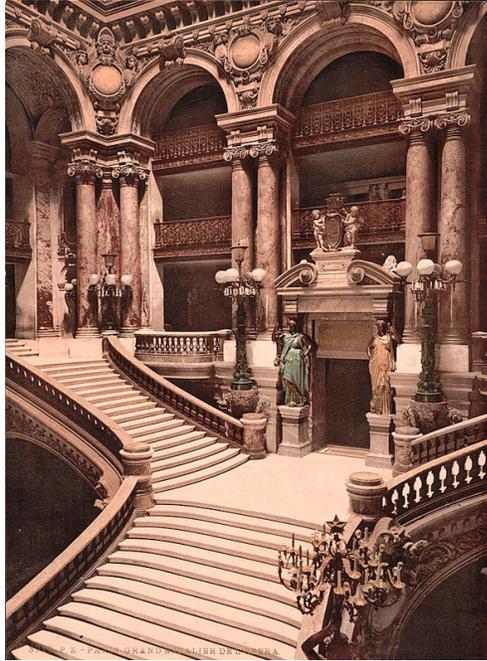


Figure 10. Grand Staircase, The Paris Opera, Paris, France. Charles Garnier, 1857-1874.



Figure 11. Unknown, Painting of the Foyer de la Danse, c. 1900



Figure 12. Edgar Degas, *Dancer Leaving her Dressing Room*, oil on canvas, c. 1879, Private Collection



Figure 13. Edgar Degas, *Dancers Backstage*, 1876-1883, oil on canvas, 9 ½ x 7 ¾ in. (24.2 x 18.8 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection.



Figure 14. Edgar Degas. *Waiting*, c. 1882, pastel on paper, 48.3 x 61 cm (19 x 24 in.) The Getty Center Los Angeles.

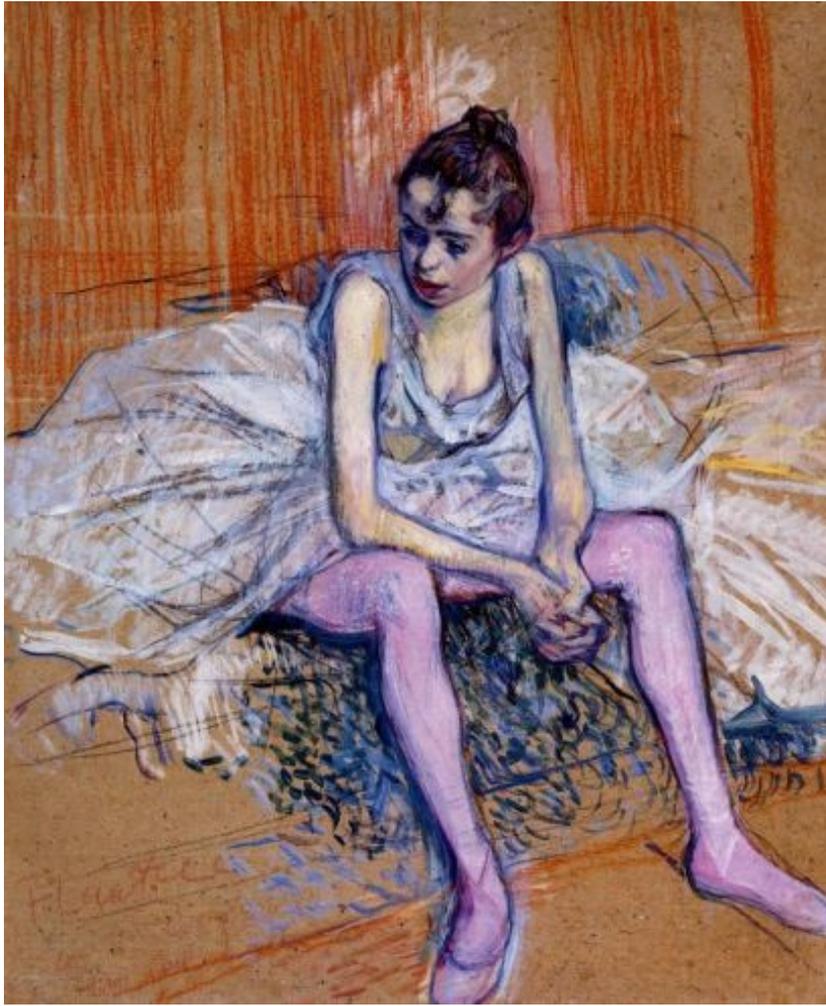


Figure 15. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. *Seated Dancer in Pink Tights*, 1890, thinned oil and pastel on board, Private Collection. 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (57.5 x 46.7 cm)



Figure 16. Manet. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, Édouard Manet, 1882, oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

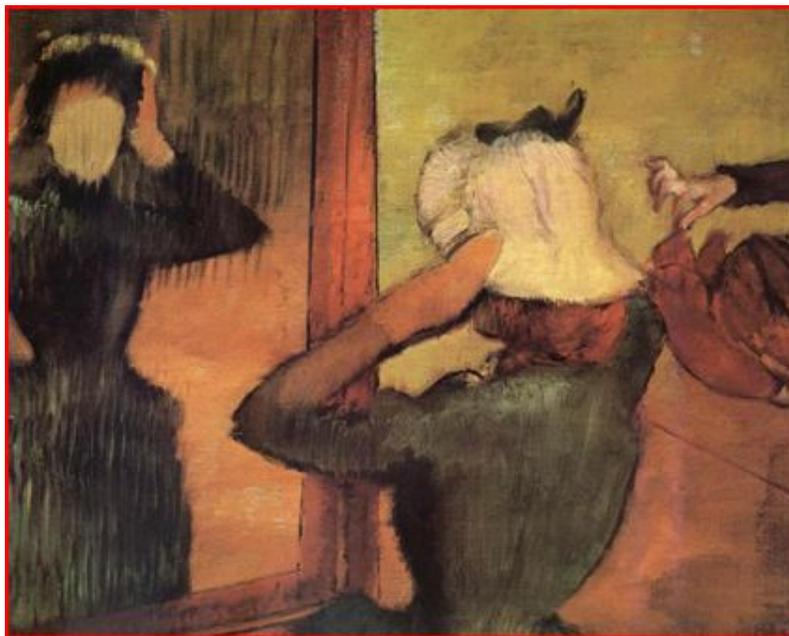


Figure 17. Edgar Degas, *At the Milliner*, 1882-1885, oil on canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

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## VITA

Lisa Simone Martin was born in Kansas City, MO on March 3, 1980. She attended school locally, graduating from Hickman Mills High School in 1998. Ms. Martin began her studies at the University of Missouri- Columbia in 1998, studying art history and environmental design. She graduated from the University of Missouri- Columbia in May of 2003.

After returning to Kansas City, Ms. Martin interned at the American Jazz Museum in the historic 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine District of the city. While at the museum, she assisted in curating several gallery exhibitions, participated in collections activities and aided with the restoration of the John Baker Film Collection.

At the end of her year-long internship, Ms. Martin began her graduate studies at the University of Missouri- Kansas City. While working toward the completion of her degree, Ms. Martin held positions, first at the University of Missouri Kansas City Women's Center and later at the Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault. In both of these positions, Ms. Martin worked in the field of gender inequalities. Ms. Martin guest lectured at area universities and presented trainings to local law enforcement on these issues.

Upon completion of her master's degree, Ms. Martin plans to continue her work with gender inequalities within the art field.