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FROM PRACTICE TO PERFORMANCE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF BALLET IN
DEGAS'S DANCER PAINTING PROCESS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Fine Arts
at the University of Kentucky

By
Whitney LeeAnn Hill
Lexington, Kentucky
Director: Dr. Anna Brzyski, Professor of Art History
Lexington, Kentucky
2018

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

FROM PRACTICE TO PERFORMANCE:

THE IMPORTANCE OF BALLET IN

DEGAS'S DANCER PAINTING PROCESS

The context in which any artist creates an artwork is integral to understanding its significance, and one crucial aspect of context is how a work was created. When first looking at how Edgar Degas created his dancer paintings, his process seems simple- he watched the dancers and then painted what he saw. However, that is only a surface examination of a much more complicated system of observation, practice, repetition, mastery, and reproduction. This thesis investigates how Degas bridged the gap between observation and understanding of balletic technique; how deep his knowledge of balletic technique was; and if Degas did have a deep understanding of balletic technique, what process he utilized to gain that knowledge. It reconstructs the process Degas utilized to learn and then reproduce the repertoire of the Paris Opéra ballet by pairing visual analysis of specific works with my own knowledge of ballet technique as a dancer of twenty years. Ultimately, this study reveals that Degas learned how to dance classical ballet by mimicking the process ballerinas used to learn how to dance: first watching, then doing, and finally performing.

KEYWORDS: Interdisciplinary Research, Dance History, Edgar Degas, Ballet, Artist Process

Whitney Hill

December 14, 2018

FROM PRACTICE TO PERFORMANCE:

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917) once told the Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard, "People call me the painter of dancing girls."[1] In the late 1860s, Degas began to observe and draw the actors and dancers he saw practicing and performing at the Paris Opéra. By the early 1870s, he had exhibited several paintings of the ballet classroom and emerged as a specialist painter of the ballet in the Parisian avant-garde.[2] While he was not the only artist during this time to depict dancers, the way he depicted them was vastly different. Degas chose to address the physical realities of the dancers' daily routine instead of perpetuating the idealized image of a dancer as the flirtatious coryphée or angelic nymph that was the established stereotypes of the day.[3] Critics such as Armand Silvestre and Émile Porcheron celebrated Degas for his pictures of ballet performances and classrooms identifying him with the margins of the stage, a juncture between public spectacle and private experience, which seemed to define an "absolute reality" of the age .[4]

In the scholarship centered on Degas' choice of subjects- encompassing a range of subjects from the female nude, patrons of the café, patrons of the horse races, to the dancers- the discourse hinges on his investigations of modernity and the different avenues he employed to portray rapidly changing Parisian life.[5] It is this desire to capture the modern Paris and the experiences within it that directed his interest in

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[1] Jill DeVonyar, and Richard Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 66 (2007): 30-40.

[2] Annette Dixon, Jill DeVonyar, Richard Kendall, Mary Weaver Chapin, and Florence Valdès-Forain, *The Dancer: Degas, Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec*, (Portland: Portland Art Musuem, 2008) 41.

[3]Annette Dixon, Jill DeVonyar, Richard Kendall, Mary Weaver Chapin, and Florence Valdès-Forain, *The Dancer*, 41.

[4] DeVonyar, and Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," 30-40.

[5] Annette Dixon, "Investigations of Modernity: The Dancer in the Work of Degas, Forain, and Toulouse-Lautrec," in *The Dancer: Degas, Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec* (Portland: Portland Art Musuem, 2008), 14.

depicting dancers. In 1990s, Richard Kendall emerged as one of the leading Degas scholars. In his 1996 monograph *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, Kendall investigated Degas's later work, specifically how the artist's work changes after the year 1890, and how this body of work shared in the fundamental re-shaping of the visual arts at the turn of the century. Renoir once said "If Degas had died at fifty, he would have been remembered as an excellent painter, no more: it is after his fiftieth year that his work broadened out and that he really becomes Degas." It is this sentiment that Kendall explored in his book.[6] It was during this later period that Degas' love affair with the ballet and the human figure soared and his body of work became narrowed to the ballet and the bathers.[7] Kendall discussed how Degas focused on the physical bodily particularity of his subjects, their weariness and shared human predicament, unlike his successors who would abstract the forms of their subjects. Paul Valery stated that Degas "defin[ed] a momentary pose of the body with the greatest precision [that gave] the

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[6] Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, (London: National Gallery Publications Limited, 1996).

[7] For more information on Degas's bathers and nudes see Lucian Freud, Martin Gayford, Anne Roquebert, George T.M. Shackelford, and Xavier Ray, *Degas and the Nude*, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2011). During the 19th century nudes were an exceptionally popular subject and were created to be a fantasy, the female body depicted an object of desire. In contrast, Degas's nudes were set within his genre paintings reflecting his desire to capture modern Parisian life. His bathing nudes expressed the awkward realities of bathing, vagaries of balance, and the vulnerability of nakedness and his early monotypes of modern brothels revealed the body as a sexual commodity. Later, he made the nude as a subject of art for its own sake, expressing a new appreciation of the human body. The series of essays in *Degas and the Nude* explore Degas's youthful classical bodies, the Realist bodies of his maturity, and the expressive, artistic bodies of old age by examining his bathers throughout the decades of his life. *Degas and the Nude* does not give precedence to the view that his bathers must be construed as straightforward depictions of low-socioeconomic women, specifically prostitutes, and that the female model must be the subject of sexual transgression because they are being viewed and recorded by a male artist. The authors instead explore the complex and contradictory nature of Degas's nudes, ultimately highlighting his wonder of the modern world outside his own body expressed through his representation of the female nude.

greatest possible generalization."[8] During this mature period Degas stripped down both his technique and his range of subject matter, pursuing specific themes through dozens of works of art in different mediums over a twenty-year period. The sustained series of dancers and bathers lack the narrative quality and special definition that was apparent in his earlier work. Instead they focus on color and the obsessive depiction of the female body.[9]

Kendall and Jill DeVonyar addressed the subject of Degas' fascination with ballet in their 2002 book *Degas and the Dance*.[10] Specifically, they scrutinized Degas' images of the ballet and his years spent in class, at rehearsals, and ballet performances. The authors brought together art and ballet history to situate Degas' works within the complex framework of historic and cultural circumstances in which they were made. Their analysis revealed a number of surprising and seemingly contradictory facts. As a young man in his twenties Degas used cheap engravings and photographs to study the Paris stage. Yet later, starting in late 1860s, he sought direct access to dancers backstage, in class, and at rehearsal. Throughout the next thirty years his familiarity with the dancers and their technique grew and influenced his depictions of the dancers and their environments. DeVonyar and Kendall found it paradoxical that some images, which appeared to be naturalistic, were actually synthetic compositions combining memory, observation, and drawings to create scenes that had not actually existed in reality.

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[8] Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*.
[9] Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, ibid. Kendall also addressed Degas's sculptures and the process of creating those works, however they will not be discussed in this paper.
[10] Jill DeVonyar and Richard Kendall, *Degas and the Dance*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002).

In his later years Degas appeared to switch his priorities driven by a desire to unite classical poise with vivid and explosive color. Kendall and DeVonyar examined Degas' desire to be more than merely illustrative. They argued that Degas' images of ballerinas were not documentary, but rather an artistic interpretation of the ballet that reflected his feelings and perspective on the ballet.[11] They proposed that Degas' sketches were preparatory studies, like nude sketches done before a grand history painting. The artist then used to create full, finished works of art. He worked in this manner in both his sculptures and multifigure paintings. This theory explains in part how Degas was able to capture the ephemeral and dynamic nature of the ballet performance by relying on preparatory sketches focused on the ballet technique to convey the elusive qualities of the ballet performance.[12]

DeVonyar and Kendall continued their analysis of Degas' technique in their 2007 article, which focused on the artist's *fin de siècle*[13] pastel *Dancers* [Figure 1]. They described several drawings, which incorporate the overlapping forms of the same three characters seen in the Dancers pastel, as "rehearsals" for the final product.[14] They also discussed how in these later drawings and pictures space, location, and narrative have been suppressed or abandoned entirely, with only the recognition of the figures as

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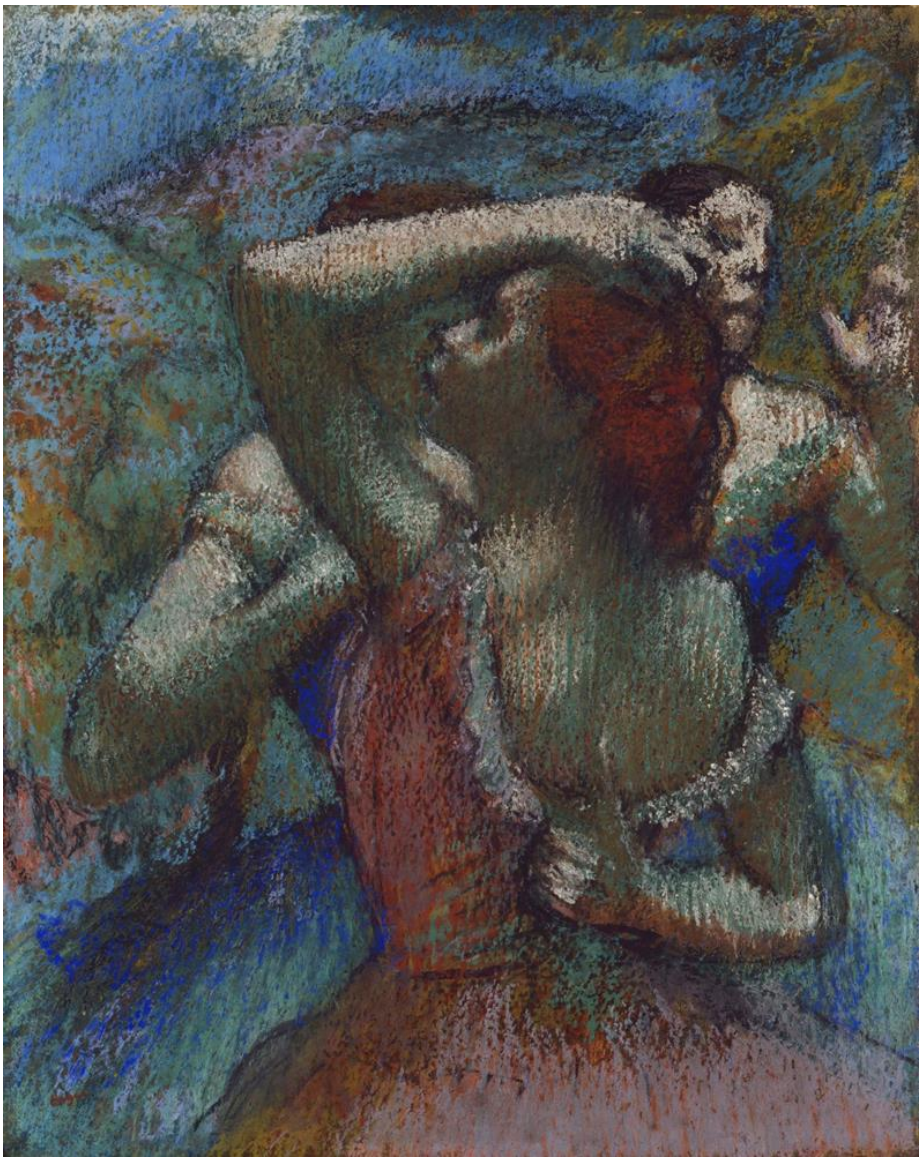
[11] DeVonyar and Kendall, *Degas and the Dance*, 230-279.
[12] DeVonyar and Kendall, *Degas and the Dance*, ibid.
[13] DeVonyar, and Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," 30-40.
[14] DeVonyar and Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," 36. This reference to rehearsals is different to what I am addressing in this paper. In this paper I am speaking to his drawings as preparatory, similar to how a dancer prepares by practicing in class, leading up to using these drawings as a blueprint for more complete compositions. Whereas the rehearsals in DeVonyar and Kendall reference are pastels that were not preparatory, but a development of one compositional idea.



[Figure 1] Edgar Degas, *Dancers*, c. I900, Pastel on tracing paper mounted on wove paper, Princeton University Art Museum, bequest of Harry K. Dick, Class of I909.

ballerinas remaining unequivocal. According to DeVonyar and Kendall, these studies reveal Degas' shift to a more de-contextualized representations of the ballet performers. They observed that the "girls of the Opera" became "modern women of all times, effectively abandoning their overt associations with the classical ballet."[15] They

[15] DeVonyar, and Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," 39.

argued that throughout his representation of dancers, Degas shifted the focus from the ethereal or the ideal, to the real.[16]

Yet, while DeVonyar and Kendall noted Degas' observation of dance classes, rehearsals, and performances as the basis for his depictions of dancers, they did not address the specific process that allowed the artist to transform his visual observations into accurate depictions of ballet technique that underpinned his finished paintings and pastels. DeVonyar noted that "Degas became surprisingly knowledgeable about ballet technique, which is evident in scores of drawings on which he noted the name of the step represented or a comment on his model's proficiency."[17] Yet, there is no further mention of the process he took to become aware and then proficient in ballet technique, beyond scrutinizing ballerinas during their daily routines and hiring dancers to model for him in his studio.[18] This thesis will focus on this issue by drawing a parallel between the dancer's training in classical ballet and the artist's own acquisition of technical knowledge of classical ballet. The main questions that it will investigate are: how did Degas bridge the gap between observation and understanding of balletic technique? How deep was his knowledge of balletic technique? And if Degas did have a deep understanding of balletic technique, what process did he utilize to gain that knowledge?

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[16]DeVonyar, and Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," 30-40.
[17] Jill DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," in *Degas: A Passion for Perfection*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 165.
[18] Jill DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," 165.

This thesis will focus on a sample of the twenty paintings of the Paris Opéra dancers' rehearsals Degas painted from 1870 to 1880 and his preparatory drawings of balletic technique created between 1860 and 1880.[19] Degas began investigating the ballet in the early 1860s and his first compositional painting of a ballet rehearsal was created in 1871. The drawings and paintings from this decade of Degas' career are the earliest iterations of his dancer images and thus reflect the time during which the artist was familiarizing himself with the inner workings of the ballet, the dancers' daily routines, and balletic technique. This thesis will attempt to reconstruct the process Degas utilized to learn and then reproduce the repertoire of the Paris Opéra ballet by pairing visual analysis of specific works with my own knowledge of ballet technique as a dancer of twenty years.

I propose that Degas was learning how to dance classical ballet by mimicking the process ballerinas utilized to learn how to dance. This is a process of first watching, then practicing, and finally performing. To learn a simple movement, such as a demi plié, a dancer watches someone who is already proficient in the movement execute it and then attempts to replicate the movement just observed.[20] This is repeated over and over while any errors are corrected through a combination of observing the movement in a mirror and oral correction by the teacher. Once this intense repetition leads to

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[19] I am aware that he painted images of performances and rehearsals on stage, however, I will not be addressing those paintings in this paper. I am also aware of his later work, and the differences that arise after 1880 in his dancer images from his earlier depictions of dancers. However, I will not be addressing his later work in this paper, as I am setting up how he acquired his ballet vocabulary and not how it is developed and changed over time. Thus, I will only be addressing his earliest iterations of his dancer images.

[20] Plié means to bend where a dancer bends the knees and straightens them again with feet turned out and heels firmly on the ground

proficiency, a dancer is able to add a movement to a repertoire of others she has already perfected to create a phrase. A phrase is when a sequence of movements is strung together to create part of a choreographic pattern. The foundation of dancing is technique, because without perfected technique, no dancer would be able to perform ballet in the way it was intended with seeming ease to the audience. Degas replicated the process of first watching, then practicing, and finally performing by observing, sketching, and finally completing finished compositions.

Table 1. Comparison of Dancer and Degas's Process

Watching = Observing
Doing = Drawing
Performing = Finished Compositional Painting

Degas painted ballerinas in a seemingly effortless and realistic way, achieving the effect of immediacy, that allows viewers to imagine that they are themselves witnessing the ballet performance in person. To create this effect Degas had to learn how to capture dancers' ephemeral movements in a realistic and accurate way. He did this by learning the ballet technique. He first watched the ballerinas execute and practice their movements over and over. As he was watching he learned how a dancer's body should have aligned, what her arm should look like in different positions, and where a leg should be placed in certain movements. His drawing captured this process. They did not always perfectly depict accurate technique, but through repeatedly drawing the dancers he was able to correct himself, much like the dancers self-corrected in a mirror. Finally,

once he had perfected the depiction of a movement, he was able to add it to his repertoire and include this position in his larger compositional paintings. These larger compositional paintings are Degas's performance.

Edgar Degas's father exposed him early in life to fine art and the world and liked to take the young Degas to the Louvre while expounding on the virtues of the 15th-century Italians artists. Degas was educated at Louis-le-Grand, the most prestigious lycée in France where he was taught a curriculum based on the classics: Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and French literature of the 17th- and 18th-centuries as well as music and drawing. The students practiced their drawing by sketching from casts from the antique and engravings of the old masters supervised by professional artists. In 1853 Degas passed his Baccalaureate meaning that he became eligible for higher education putting him in an elite circle, even among his social class. He was enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts for a short period of time where he studied under Hippolyte Flandrin, a student of Ingres, who was at the time a leading figure within French academic art.[21] This academic education is reflected in how Degas approached his dancer images. He practiced drawing the ballerinas' anatomies as they danced in a similar way to how the students at the academies practiced drawing the human body. In both instances there is intense repetition to perfect knowledge of the human body to add it to the artists' visual vocabulary.

[21]Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *Degas*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), ibid, 15-41.

In the spring of 1856 Degas left for Italy, where he had family connections. He described these years as the most wonderful period of his life, since he had total freedom to study the great Italian masters and antiques, something that was still seen as essential to a painter's training, with complete financial security. During his time in Italy his most significant new connection was Gustave Moreau. Moreau was associated with the Romanticism, a forbidden ideology within the Ingres controlled École des Beaux-Arts, whose central figure was Delacroix. In 1858, Moreau and Degas travelled together to Florence where Moreau introduced Degas to the Macchiaioli.[22] These artists were interested in landscape and scenes of everyday life, and highly influenced Degas's style and later oeuvre.

After Degas returned from Italy to Paris in 1859 his father warned him against the "dubious shortcuts" his father associated with Romanticism: "You know that I am far from sharing your opinion of Delacroix, a painter who has abandoned himself to the chaos of his notions and unfortunately for himself has neglected the art of drawing, that keystone on which everything depends".[23] The antithesis of Delacroix was Jean-Auguste-Dominque Ingres who founded his practice in the Florentine tradition of drawing as the foundation of painting, exemplified in the heroic paintings by Raphael, Michelangelo,

[22] "spot-painters" which held the same social standing as the avant-garde painters in Paris in the mid-19th century
[23] Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *Degas*, ibid, 22.

and Poussin.[24] Degas' father wanted to ensure that his son did not forget that all fine art rested on draughtsmanship, and not on fanciful theories.

From his return to Paris in 1859 to 1865, Degas worked on a progression of complex history paintings, five in total, only one of which he submitted to the Salon. These were the last paintings he ever created that were not of modern life.[25] His time with the Macchiaioli led to his interest in connecting with the young painters of Paris, the most influential and important of whom for Degas was Manet.[26] Manet who was also fascinated with the alternative Italian Macchiaioli way of painting and was at the center of the avant-garde social scene focused at the Café Guerbois in the Grand Rue des Batignolles.[27] Degas and Manet first met in 1864 at the Louvre, and it was Manet that was the most compelling influence on Degas's final move toward "modern" subjects.[28] Degas begins to paint at the horseraces as his passion for observing modern Parisian life takes off. The established racetrack at Longchamp in the Bois de Boulogne and the hunting and riding parties of his friends gave him access to the social spectacle of the racecourse, the private interactions during the private hunting parties, and bodies and movements of the thoroughbreds.[29]

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[24] Gordon and Forge, *Degas*, 7.
[25] Gordon and Forge, *Degas*, 22.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 23.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Jean Sutherland Boggs, Shelly G. Sturman, Daphne S. Barbour, and Kimberly Jones, *Degas at the Races*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998).

From 1865 to 1870, Degas's interest in the racetrack becomes an established subject for him as well as two other subjects- theater and dancers.[30] Degas always had a love of the theater, and during the 1860s, he began to investigate this lifelong interest and integrate it into his own art. The earliest identifiable theater scene Degas drew was a series of sketches made in three tiny notebooks of an actress and ancillary figures in 1856 as an art student before he left for his sojourn in Italy.[31] Between 1860 and 1863, Degas produced notebooks containing dozens of actors in character costumes, spectators in theater boxes, actors declaiming, and putative scenes from dramas, musicians and instrumentalists, and faces in crowds and audiences.[32] In 1868 Degas premiered a portrait of Eugénie Fiocre, a prominent ballerina at Le Peletier Opéra, and during his preparations for Fiocre's portrait, he made hurried sketches of the production and a set of drawings focused on her gestures, costumes, and bodily expressions.[33] Degas's first full compositional painting of the Paris Opéra ballet's classes and rehearsals was painted in 1871 [Figure 2], and by 1873 collectors and critics were beginning to take notice of Degas as "a painter of dancers."[34]

Degas's choice of the dancers of the Paris Opéra or the Académie Royale de Musique as it was formally known, is one that Degas and his contemporaries would have

[30] Gordon and Forge, *Degas*, 24.
[31] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 42.
[32] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 43.
[33] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 43.
[34] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 47-58.

[Figure 2] Edgar Degas, *The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier (Dance Class at the Opéra)*, c. 1872, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

been very familiar with. Audiences of many backgrounds were drawn to the Paris Opéra from the elite class of Paris, ambassadors, deputies, and those Parisians of more modest means because of its "glorious masterpieces of music," stunning architecture, priceless artworks, and mesmerizing singers and dancers.[35] Of the many types of people who attended the Opéra, the most elite class were known as the *abonnés*, or annual subscribers, from Paris's leading families.[36] For the exclusively male *abonnés* the Opéra was a place that combined business, social display, and "a variety of physical pleasures, apart from and sometimes irrespective of the production itself."[37] For these elite

[35] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," *Degas and the Dance*, 15-41.
[36] Dixon, "Investigations of Modernity: The Dancer in the Work of Degas, Forain, and Toulouse-Lautrec," 13.
[37] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," 20.

patrons, the Paris Opéra was not only a place to see a ballet or the latest opera, but a place in which they could indulge in sexual encounters with a dancer that caught their eye on stage.[38] The partial privatization of the Opéra in 1830 made it profitable for management to allow open access to the dancers for the wealthy patrons so the *foyer de la danse*, the rehearsal and reception room where the *abonnés* could meet the dancers, was created.[39] A subscription for tickets for three nights a week would allow the *abonnés* access to the *foyer de la danse.*[40] Many dancers at the Paris Opéra were from the lower classes hoping that by rising through the ranks of ballet they could not only contribute money to their finically struggling families, but to better their own station in life, which was incredibly difficult for members of the lower class in the late 19th century.[41] The backstage access given to the *abonnés,* and the precarious financial

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[38] For a historical and cultural background on gender, class, and vision see Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995). She explores how the human body, especially the female body, was visualized in later 19th century Paris by focusing on the work of Degas in her book *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas*. She takes an interdisciplinary method of analyzing Degas's oeuvre- paying attention to the relationship between art, science, and modernity in later 19th century France- addressing issues of the visualization of socio-scientific ideas of health and disease, hygiene and dirt, prostitution, criminality, sexuality, marriage, class, race, anatomy and evolutionism, and the ideological structuring of urban space. The focus of her argument is the importance of the cultural discourses of vision and visual representation in the discussion of the emergence of urban modernity and the study of its pictorial products. Callen stresses the importance of understanding the complex and historically specific processes of sight, the experience of looking, and the mechanics of reading the visual. In later 19th century France, the images created of modernity are set within the bourgeois patriarchal ideology of binary principles; masculine and feminine, white and black, and bourgeois and working class. *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* examines the ways patriarchy pictures femininity and masculinity in order to contain women and empower men and how Degas's oeuvre fits into this structure. Degas's work gave a visual constitution to a crisis of masculinity expressed as fears of the feminine and of female sexuality, and by studying his oeuvre, it puts a spotlight on how privileged sight and the male gaze functioned to subvert women's roles in society.

[39] Julie Townsend, *The Choreography of Modernism in France: La Danseuse, 1830-1930*, (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2010), 12.

[40] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," 20.

[41] Dixon, "Investigations of Modernity," 13.

situation many dancers found themselves in, allowed these men to pressure the ballerinas to succumb to their sexual advances and become their mistresses.[42]

While Degas did grow up in an upper middle-class family and was a part of the elite social scene, he was not a wealthy man and would not have been able to afford the *abonnés* seats. However, he was good friends with several men, specifically Lepic Halévy, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Paul Valpinçon, who were documented as having *abonnés* seats. There is also a letter from 1882 in which Degas is scheming to secure a full subscription to the Opéra, "a seat for three days", through his connections at the Opéra proposing he would share the expense with friends while reserving "the right to go behind the scenes" for himself.[43]

While Degas was able to obtain the elite *abonnés* seats through friendships with those men who could afford them, and therefore would have had access to more intimate settings with the dancers, he also had well documented friendships with men and women who worked at or closely with the Paris Opéra. He had long standing friendships with Count Ludovic Lepic, a balletomane and the lover of premier dancer Marie Sanlaville, and Ludovic Halévy, a popular librettist and author who was also the nephew of the illustrious Paris Opéra composer Fromenthal Halévy. Degas exchanged letters with the renowned Opéra baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure and referenced the Opéra ballet master Louise Mérante in one his letters stating, "You are singing tonight I

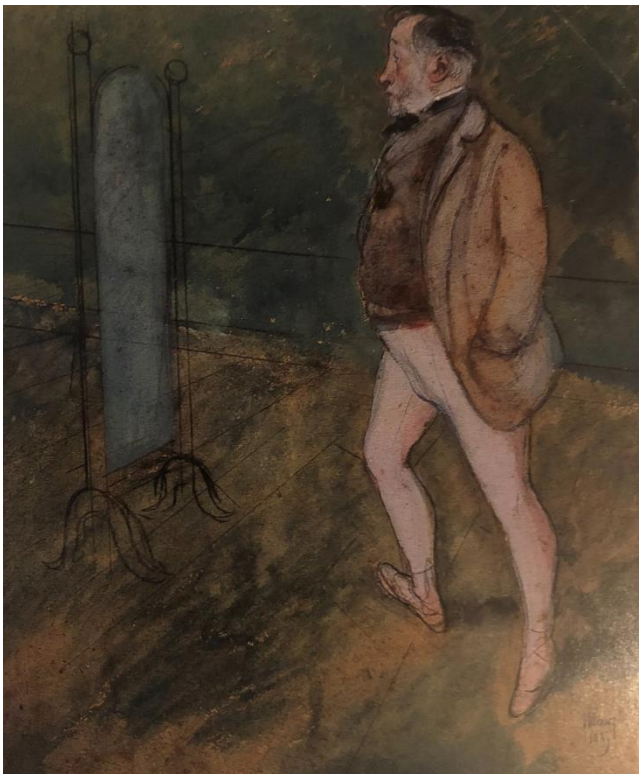
[42] Dixon, "Investigations of Modernity," 13.
[43] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," ibid, 22.

believe. Do not forget to remind Mérante about the photographs he offered me yesterday."[44] His relationship with Faure was substantial enough for Faure to commission *The Ballet from "Robert le Diable"* which featured one of the fixtures of the Paris Opéra, Albert Hecht. Hecht later bought pictures from Degas and helped him gain access to an Opéra dance examination. This allowed Degas to meet Mon. Vaucorbeil the director of the Opéra at that time, and in 1886 sent a letter of congratulations to the new director Eugène Bertrand stating, "You have favored me so exceptionally, that I feel myself a little attached to your fortunes and that I am getting to be, as they say, one of the household."[45] Yet, while Degas was a part of the *abonnés* set, his access to the backstage of the Paris Opéra was much more extensive than the average *abonnés*. While *abonnés* had access to the *foyer de la danse* and occasionally the wings of the stage, they never had access to the dancers' classrooms or rehearsals.

Degas also had documented accounts of relationships with the Opéra dancers, in reports of social encounters, accounts of modeling sessions, and evidence of private infatuations and innocent friendships. Some of these dancers were Eugénie Fiocre, Joséphine Gaujelin, and Mlle Simon to whom he wrote a letter to in 1872. In his letter to Mlle Simon, he greeted several of the other dancers and asked after the new *première danseuse* Rita Sangalli. Degas also became acquainted with two of the most glamourous Opéra celebrities, Rosita Mauri and Marie Sanlaville who visited his studio with their entourages to pose for him on multiple occasions. During this time Degas's identification

[44] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," 14.
[45] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," ibid, 14-15.

with the Opéra dancers was so pronounced that several of his friends caricatured him as one, for example the drawing *Caricature of Degas as Dancer* by Michael Manzi [Figure 3].[46] It was in the second Impressionist exhibition of 1876 when critics took notice of Degas's ballerina paintings hailing them for their topicality and visual novelty.[47] After viewing Degas's dancer paintings, Edmond Duranty urged Parisian artists to get "out into the real world" and create a new type of painting that depicted modern life "in a thousand unexpected ways."[48]Armand Silvestre proclaimed that "Monsieur Degas



[Figure 3] Michael Manzi, *Caricature of Degas as a Dancer*, 1885, pencil and ink heightened with gouache and watercolor.

[46] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas at the Paris Opéra," ibid, 14-15.
[47] Jill DeVonyar, and Richard Kendall, ""Dancers" by Edgar Degas," *Record of the Art Museum*, Princeton University 66 (2007): 30-40.
[48] Edmond Duranty, "The New Painting" (originally published 1876, quoted in *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, exh. cat., Fine Arts Museum pf San Francisco, directed and coordinated by Charles Moffett et al. (San Francisco, 1986), 44-45.

distinguishes himself by the truthfulness of his studies of the wings."[49] Émile Zola lauded Degas's entries in the 1876 Impressionist exhibition for their "truth" and "realism" and noted that Degas had a talent for evoking "everyday types."[50]Joris-Karl Huysmans applauded that is the dancers do not have "creamy and artificial skin, but real flesh that is a little dulled by the layers of paste and powder. It has an absolute reality and is truly beautiful."[51] Felix Feneon stated that Degas did not just "copy from nature," commenting that his color was "artificial" and that his compositions were assembled from a "multitude of sketches of the same subject," where a more complex "truth" emerged.[52]

But what exactly was Degas observing in the classrooms and rehearsals of the Paris Opèra ballet? What daily routines, codified positions, and exercises did he witness? Ballet in France began when Catherine de Medici wed the French King Henri II in 1553. Ballet was a type of court dance that the princes and nobility of Milan, Venice, and Florence practiced that included flaming torch dances, elaborate horse ballets with hundreds of mounted cavaliers that are in symbolic formations, and masked interludes with heroic, allegorical, and exotic themes.[53] This form of entertainment grew within the

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[49] Armand Silvestre, "Exposition de la rue Le Peletier" (originally published 1876), quoted in *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886, Documentation*, ed. Ruth Berson (San Francisco, 1996), vol. 1, *Reviews,* 109.
[50]DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance,"164.
[51]Joris-Karl Huysmans, "L'Exposation des indépendants en 1880" (originally published 1883), *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886, Documentation*, ed. Ruth Berson (San Francisco, 1996), vol. 1, *Reviews*, 86.
[52] Félix Fénéon, "Les Impressionists," 441.
[53] Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. (New York: Random House Inc., 2010), 42.

French Court and the study of ballet became a part of the Académie de Poésie et de Musique which was established in 1570 by King Charles IX.[54] In 1661 King Louis XIV founded the Royal Academy of Dance stating that "the art of dancing… is most advantageous and useful to our nobility and to the other people who have the honor of approaching us, not only in the time of war, in our armies, but also in time of peace in our ballets. [The] disorders caused by the latest wars [that led to] abuses. [The purpose of the Academy was to] restore the art of dancing to its first perfection."[55]

During the reign of King Louis XIV, the dancing master Beauchamps codified the five positions of the body- First Position, Second Position, Third Position, Fourth Position, and Fifth Position.[56] The positions Beauchamps codified are the basis for the

Table 2. Five Ballet Body Positions

1st Position 2nd Position 3rd Position 4th Position 5th Position

five ballet body positions, where the dancer's feet needed to be turned out at the hip at 45 degrees in these five positions.[57] Louis XIV wanted to extend French culture, artistic,

[54] Homan, *Apollo's Angels*, 45.
[55] Homan, *Apollo's Angels*, 68.
[56] Homan, *Apollos Angels*, 84-85.
[57] Homan, *Apollos Angels*, 84-85.

and intellectual practices on an international level and this included ballet. This desire to extend French dance into other parts of Europe made it necessary to write down steps, which the ballet master Beauchamps did, and later allowed for entire ballets to be passed from one place to another.[58] Through the canonization of ballet, with the formation of the Academy and the precise etiquette of steps (that later translated into technique), laid the foundations of classical ballet and formed the genesis of ballet in the 19th century.[59]

The formation of Degas's dance vocabulary began at the *Rue Le Peletier Opéra.* The *Rue Le Peletier Opéra* was built in 1821 by the architect François Debert and made largely from recycled elements of the previous theater and impermanent materials such as wood and plaster. *Le Peletier* was intended to be a temporary home for the opera and ballet, while a grander and more permanent edifice was being built but ended up being used for half a century. The design of the *Le Peletier* followed the architectural conventions of its day, a large, cube-like stage with an opulent auditorium in the center allowing for the clustering of the theater's social and technical amenities around the outside of the stage and auditorium. Behind the scenes where the dressing rooms were, *foyer de la danse*, and classrooms were notoriously crowed and chaotic, teeming with dancers known as *rats*. One English writer commented that the "number of staircases and corridors which cross each other in all directions were like a labyrinth," at *Le Peletier*.[60] At this time practice sessions to determine the leading role of a ballet were

[58] Homan, *Apollo's Angels*, 76.
[59] Homan, *Apollo's Angels*, 78-85.
[60] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue le Peletier Opéra," *Degas and the Dance*, 33.

conducted in backstage classrooms and foyers while the larger gatherings of the *corps de ballet* were held on the *Rue Le Peletier* stage. In October of 1873 the *Rue Le Peletier Opéra* burned down in a fire, ending the tenure of the Paris opera and ballet at the theater of Degas's youth.[61]

Before the destruction of the *Rue Le Peletier Opéra*, there was already talk about replacing the dilapidated structure.[62] In 1860 an official competition was held for the design of the new Opéra house and Charles Garnier's design won.[63] The construction of the magnificent structure continued for over a decade and was finished in January of 1975, replacing *Le Peletier* as the home of the Paris Opéra and ballet. The *Palais Garnier* was far more splendid and grandiose than *Le Peletier*. Garnier himself saw dance as a secondary attraction and had a condescending attitude towards the dancers. While the *Palais Garnier* produced a building for extravagant ballet productions, the complexities and contradictions of the audience's visual experience were incredibly important to Garnier. Music and drama dominated Garnier's thinking and this desire to create a building that reflected his passion led Garnier to consider sight, color, lighting, and movement in his theater. The *Palais Garnier* had brightly lit, hygienic, and larger accommodations, classrooms, and dressing rooms, for the performers than *Le Peletier*.[64] While Garnier had a certain distain for the ballet, he did build two purposeful areas in the upper levels of the *Palais Garnier* for the dancers' use; one for the exercises of the

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[61] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," ibid, 29- 61.
[62] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 33.
[63] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Rue Le Peletier Opéra," 33.
[64] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Palais Garnier Years," *Degas and the Dance*, ibid. 89-117.

corps de ballet which was a vast circular room situated in the floor above the rotunda of the west pavilion, and the other to teach the young children of the ballet situated beneath the secondary stairs in the west wing in an immense rectangular room.[65] While Degas actually did observe in all of the different rooms in both *Le Peletier* and the *Palais Garnier*, the architecture seen in his paintings of the classrooms, rehearsals, and performances are mainly compilations of the rooms he observed in *Le Peletier*.

During the nineteenth century dance authorities traced the origins of ballet to antiquity in order to elevate its prestige. This explains why developing a technical language and stylistic vocabulary looked back to images of dancers from ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration.[66] Carlo Blasis was a ballet master, choreographer, and dance theoretician who is regarded as the founder of modern ballet technique.[67] In the 1820s, Blasis defined a series of principles for classical dance and a parallel system of codified steps and exercises, which are largely used today in his treatise *Traité élémentaire, théorique et pratique de l'art de la danse*.[68] In the Romantic era of ballet- which spanned from about 1827 to 1870- Blasis's teachings were developed by ballet masters Filippo Taglioni, François Albert, and Arthur Saint-Léon, the latter who was still active during Degas's day.[69] The development of Blasis's principles by the romantic era ballet masters

[65] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Palais Garnier Years," 107.
[66] Jill DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," 160.
[67] DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," 162.
[68] DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," 162.
[69] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Making of a Dancer," *Degas and the Dance*, 134-135.

created the methods of training and dance vocabulary that is almost identical classical practice today.[70]

The teacher of the ballet classes were mainly women, former ballerinas hired to instruct the younger dancers, while the ballet masters were all men and acted both as choreographers and instructors to the young dancers.[71] They would direct and critic the dancers by orally explaining how to execute each movement, movement combination, and choreography.[72] The classroom would be fitted with mirrors [see Figure 10 and Figure 3] around the room which allowed the dancers to watch the movements they were directed to practice by the ballet teachers, and visually correct themselves alongside the oral corrections the ballet master gave.[73]

These basic principles are still practiced today in classical ballet training. The start of class is at the *barre*, which is a form of warming up where dancers hold onto a bar with one hand and execute simple movements that eventually builds up into larger movements, that are then executed in *centre,* and are eventually incorporated into choreography. To begin, dancers perform several movement combinations in all five positions, such as a *plié*,[74] *degage*,[75] and *tendu*.[76]

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[70] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Making of a Dancer," 134-135
[71] DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Making of a Dancer," 133.
[72] DeVonyar, "Degas, Classicism, Dance," 164.
[73] Dixon, "Investigations of Modernity," 17.
[74] Plié is when a dancer bends their knees and straightens them again
[75] Degage is when a dancer points the foot to an open position with an arched instep slightly off the floor
[76] Tondu is when the dancer slides their foot on the floor in a desired direction that ends with the foot pointed on the ground

After finishing *barre* exercises dancers begin *centre* exercises, more difficult variations of barre exercises, which allows dancers to explore how to put steps together fluidly. The most common syllabus for the *centre* begins with *tendu* exercises followed by *adagio* exercises,[77] *pirouette* exercises,[78] *petit allegro* exercises,[79] and finishing with *grande allegro* exercises.[80] While in each exercise combination there are slight variations in the exact movement combinations, for example one day a *tendu* exercise could be one slow and two quick *tendus* and the next four slow *tendus*, the technical movements and order of practice stayed the same. This repetition allows the dancers to perfect every minute detail of each movement and when movements are combined during choreography, the dancer is able to execute each movement with proper technique. The process of making a good dancer was and still is based in precision, repetition, and mastery of technique, which are achieved through countless hours of practice in the dance studio.[81]

In the second half of the 19th century, ballet classes at the Paris Opéra took place six days a week with afternoons, and occasionally evenings, occupied by rehearsals for approaching productions. Performances open to the public were performed on Monday Wednesday, and Saturday, lasting until midnight on most occasions. This added to the burden of the young dancers who would start their days at eight in the morning, usually

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[77] A slow combination of fluid extension movements
[78] A type of turn where the dancer spins on one foot with the raised foot touching the knee of the supporting leg
[79] Small, fast jumps
[80] Large jumps
[81] Gordon and Forge, "Dancers," *Degas*, 159.

with little to no food. After morning classes held in designated classrooms the dancers would begin rehearsals in the auditorium, followed by a brief break where they would return home to eat. Around 6 pm on the days productions were open to the public, the dancers would return to the Opéra to prepare for the evening performance.[82]

DeVonyar states that the most revolutionary of Degas's dance works was his series of classroom and rehearsal scenes that the artist began in the early 1870s [Figures 2, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18].[83] Instead of depicting dancers according to established stereotypes of flirtatious coryphée and angelic nymph, Degas chose to address the physical realities of the dancers' daily routines in their structured ballet classes and private practices by a direct and sustained scrutiny of standard ballet exercises and positions, dancer's bodies, and their informal labor.[84] DeVonyar acknowledged that to achieve a realistic depiction of the dancers' routines Degas had to have an understanding of classical ballet technique and a familiarity with ballet vocabulary, which is supported by several dance historians that have noted Degas's acumen in representing ballet technique.[85] But through what process did Degas learn balletic technique and how did his learning process affect the final product, his paintings?

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[82]DeVonyar and Kendall, "The Making of a Dancer," ibid, 129-132.
[83] DeVonyar, "Re-Representing the Dance: Degas's Inheritance and Legacy," *The Dancer: Degas, Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec*, (Portland: Portland Art Musuem, 2008) 212.
[84] DeVonyar, "Re-Representing the Dance: Degas's Inheritance and Legacy," 212.
[85] DeVonyar, "Re-Representing the Dance: Degas's Inheritance and Legacy," 212.

The scholarship on Degas's dancer paintings has established that the artist engaged in extended observation of dancers in the classroom, at rehearsals, and performances. These extended observations were the first step of Degas's process of creating his dancer paintings and his first step in learning balletic technique. Through them, he mimicked the first step a dancer takes in their education. During his time observing the dancers in the classroom, Degas sketched what he saw and worked through the ballet positions such as the exact placing and rendering of limbs and balletic posture within his drawings. His process of observing the dancers and learning ballet technique can be seen through the thousands of drawings he made of dancers. Degas's sketchbook became a catalogue of positions and movements he had observed and learned that he was able to translate to his compositional paintings [Figures 4, 6, 8, 14].

The importance of drawing, observation, and planning throughout Degas's career can be seen through his curation of *Vingt Dessins*, a selection of drawings that were reproduced via chromogravure and published. The works for *Vingt Dessins* were chosen from the 35-year span of Degas's career, only omitting drawings done during his student years, including five studies of the unfinished historical painting *Semiramis Building Babylon*, jockeys, bathers, laundresses, and dancers. All the drawings chosen by Degas were done with a specific aim in mind, to demonstrate his "academically derived, painstaking drawing practice," which was further highlighted by his decision to include studies for an unfinished history painting. Degas's decision to highlight his academically driven drawings in a publication that he himself curated shows that Degas wanted his viewers to understand that his work was not spontaneous and quickly created, but

instead carefully studied and thought through. Degas once said to the novelist George Moore, "your art is less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and the study of the great masters."[86] Paul Valéry commented that Degas was "the most reflective, the most demanding, the most merciless draughtsman in the world" and Théodore Duret argued that Degas's "strong point, his predominating faculty, is his draughtsmanship."[87] The importance Degas placed on observational drawings comes from the academic painting education he received at the École des Beaux-Arts and the early education in the fine arts from his father. The traditional academic process of painting put great emphasis on drawing via observation from life, specifically the human form. Artists acquired a mastery in depicting the human form through the observation and repetitive drawing from life, and this mastery was then transferred into preparatory drawings that were used as blueprints for carefully planned compositions. This method mirrors Degas's process of observation, repetitive practice through drawing, and culminating in a finished painting.[88]

The second step of Degas's process is repetition and correction, which can be seen through his drawings of the dancers. *Étude de jambs et de mouvements de bras pour une danseuse avec un tambourin* [Figure 4] is an exemplary example of Degas's use of repetition and correction in one drawing. The drawing shows the image of a dancer in

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[86] Claire Kovacs, "Vingt Dessins: Images and Order," From Degas and Manzi's Vignt Dessins an Experimental Collaboration in Print, ibid, Last update Feb. 1, 2016, http://scalar.usc.edu/works/vingt_dessins/vingt-dessins-images-and-order.
[87] Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, 66.
[88] Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, ibid, 57-89.

a *croisé devant*[89] position on the right side of the paper, and several drawings of arm and leg positions that are the same as those in the *croisé devant* on the left. Each of the separate drawings of the arm and leg positions in the drawing are slightly different yet there is a sense of repetition, as if Degas was trying to perfect his understanding of the positions of the limbs in this position by correcting himself though drawing them over and over. This shows a desire to understand how the dancers' limbs move through space in a technically correct manner, so he could then create a composition with this movement in it, while staying true to the balletic technique. This repetition was not only on one piece of paper, like *Étude de jambs et de mouvements de bras pour une danseuse avec un tambourin* [Figure 4] but was drawn over and over in different sketches like the *croisé derrière* position seen in both *Danseuse en position* [Figure 5] and *Danseuse en position, de trois quarts* [Figure 6] and the *à la seconde* position in both *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 7] and *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8].

[89] *croisé devant* means crossed to the front where the working foot points to the front, while the body is angled to about 1/8 rotation away from the audience to the left or right corner

[Figure 4] Edgar Degas, Plate 15: *Étude de jambs et de mouvements de bras pour une danseuse avec un tambourin*, From *Edgar Degas, Vingt dessins: 1861-1896*, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago.

[Figure 5] Edgar Degas, Plate 9: *Danseuse en position*, From *Edgar Degas, Vingt dessins: 1861-1896*, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago.

[Figure 6] Edgar Degas, *Danseuse en position, de trois quarts*, c. 1872-73, charcoal heightened with white on tan paper.

[Figure 7] Edgar Degas, *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)*, 1878, charcoal heightened with white on tan paper.

[Figure 8] Edgar Degas, *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)*, c. 1874, charcoal heightened with white paper on gray paper.

Danseuse en position [Figure 5] is a drawing that depicts a single dancer in a *croisé derrière*[90] position seen in profile. In this profile position, Degas is able to show the dancer's body alignment which joins together the head, torso, arms, and legs into an

[90] *croisé derrière* means crossed to the back where the working foot points to the back, while the body is angled to about 1/8 rotation away from the audience to the left or right corner

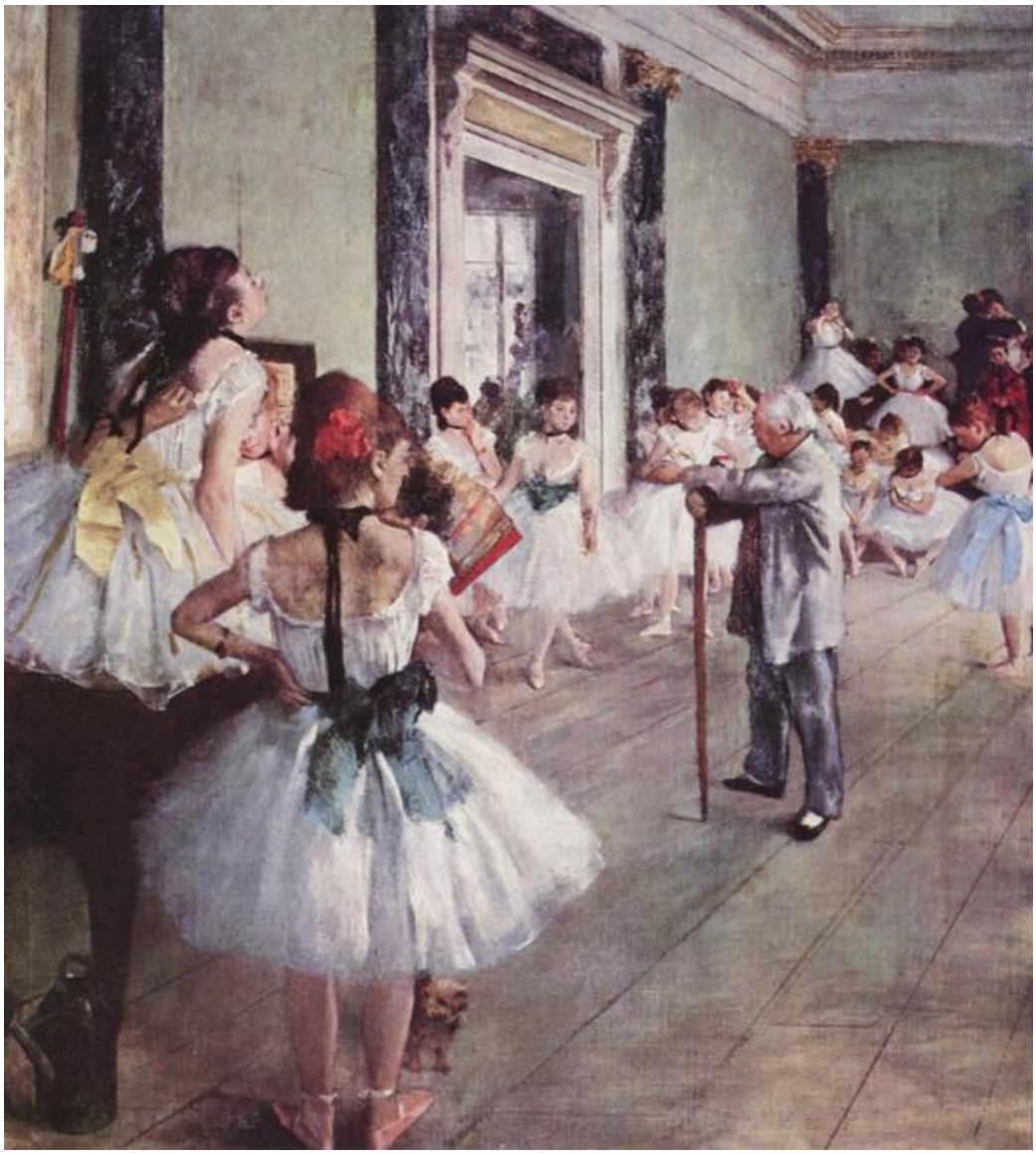
organized whole as the dancer moves through space or holds a pose. To locate proper alignment at first, a dancer stands in first position,[91] centering their heads on top of their spine with the neck stretched upward from their shoulders that are down, level, and relaxed, with their eyes focused forward. Their ribs are relaxed with their abdominal muscles engaged, lifted and pressed toward their spinal column. Their hips are level and in turn out position, with their pelvis centered under their shoulders and their tailbone dropped downward. In *Danseuse en position* [Figure 5], the dancer is in a *croisé derrière* position meaning that her torso needs to be slightly shifted forward to maintain correct body alignment so the top of her head, spine, and working leg[92] are all aligned. In Degas's drawing this can be seen. *Danseuse en position, de trois quarts* [Figure 6] also depicts a single dancer in the *croisé derrière* position, with technical accuracy (proper body alignment, pointed toes, and turn out), only from a frontal viewpoint. This shows Degas is investigating a single position repeatedly, but also that Degas is wanting to perfect the depiction of this position from all vantage points. This position can be seen in several of Degas's compositional paintings which reveals the last step of Degas's process, the mastering of a ballet position and the addition of the step into a finished painting.

For example, in *The Dance Class* [Figure 9] there is a dancer in the background of the painting, who is looking toward the dance master (the man in a suit with a cane), in

[91] When the dancer is in a standing position with their heels together and toes facing equally out of either side using turn out, which is the rotation of the leg at the hips, causing the feet to turn outward away from the front of the body

[92] The leg that is about to execute a movement, the leg that is not supporting the dancer's body weight

a *croisé derrière* position. The pose and angle the audience views is an exact copy of the dancer in a *croisé derrière* position in *Danseuse en position, de trois quarts* [Figure 6]. In *The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier* [Figure 2] on the far left at the end of the canvas, there is a dancer in the *croisé derrière* position, seen from the side profile, that is a copy of the *croisé derrière* position seen in *Danseuse en position* [Figure 5]. While *The Dance Class* [Figure 9] and *The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier* [Figure 2] both are direct copies of the original drawing, *Dance Class* [Figure 10] is not. In *Dance Class* [Figure 10] the *croisé derrière* position is also illustrated but is seen from a different angle and using her left leg as her standing leg instead of her right leg like the dancers in *Danseuse en position* [Figure 5] and *Danseuse en position, de trois quarts* [Figure 6]. This painting shows how Degas not only copies the drawings made through intense observation but gained such an understanding of balletic technique by mimicking the way dancers learn he was able to paint positions he did not specifically draw.



[Figure 9] Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, c. 1873-76, oil on canvas.

[Figure 10] Edgar Degas, *Dance Class*, c. 1871, oil on canvas.

The repetition and correction step of Degas's process can be seen in a comparison of the two drawings *Danseuse (battements à la seconde*) [Figure 8] and *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 7]. Both depict a single dancer seen from an angle off to her left in the position *à la seconde en l'air*[93] and show a refining and deepened understanding by Degas of this position. In *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 7], the precision of the position is more crudely drawn than in *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8]. While both are depictions of *à la seconde en l'air*, the details of the position in *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)*

[93] *à la seconde en l'air* is a position in ballet that means to the second position in the air where the dancer is in second position (the leg out to the dancer side) and raised in the air

[Figure 7] are imprecise; the dancer is slightly hunched with her head inched forward and her arms are a little behind her torso, making this position out of alignment, with her elbows bent down toward the ground. Her standing leg seems to be slightly bent, when it should have been stretched behind the knee to create a long line and her hips seem to be out of line, with the left hip notched up instead of being level with the right hip. Next to her arm, knee, and at the bottom of the page are written notes critiquing the dancer that he is drawing on her ballet technique. This contrasts with *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8] whose dancer has proper body alignment; her head is stacked on top of her spine and her arms rounded and slightly in front of her torso so as not to cause an arch in her back and throwing off her body alignment, and her working leg is straight while her hips are level. He even makes a point to draw reference lines in *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 7] to guide him to create proper body alignment and even hips. *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8] was drawn four years before *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 7], and in those four years, Degas had not only learned how to precisely illustrate the *à la seconde en l'air*, like the dancer in *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8], but while drawing a dancer from life he is able to both depict her movements accurately and correct her balletic technique.

Danseuse (battements à la seconde) [Figure 8] also goes through the final step in Degas's process, the using of mastered positions in a compositional painting. *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8] seems to be lifted directly from Degas's sketchbook and put into his painting *The Rehearsal* [Figure 11]. In *The Rehearsal* [Figure 11] Degas

[Figure 11] Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsal*, c. 1873, oil on canvas.

illustrates a scene from a rehearsal where four dancers are in *à la seconde en l'air* position with their left leg is the working leg, the exact position seen in *Danseuse (battements à la seconde)* [Figure 8]. In fact, Degas uses this exact *à la seconde en l'air* position in five other paintings of the Paris Opéra classroom. *The Rehearsal* [Figure 12] depicts three dancers and the leg of a fourth in the exact same *à la seconde en l'air* position, in what looks to be the same scene as *The Rehearsal* [Figure 11] from a closer position and from another vantage point. *The Dance School* [Figure 13] also seems to be another iteration of *The Rehearsal* [Figure 11] with a slightly different composition, but with the same *à la seconde en l'air* position. These three paintings not only show a repetition of the ballet position, but also of the environment the dancer's work in, which

[Figure 12] Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsal*, c. 1873-79, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York.

[Figure 13] Edgar Degas, *The Dance School*, c. 1874-79, oil and tempera on canvas, Shelburne Museum, Shelburn, Vermont

is part of what Degas observed as he watched and learned ballet technique and wanted to illustrate to his viewers.

The drawing *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] compared with another painting of the same name, *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 15], again shows the connection between Degas's observation, drawing, and polishing of his drawings into a compositional painting. *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] depicts two dancers each stretching on the *barre*, one with her left leg on the *barre* in front of her as she stretches over her raised leg and the other with her left leg on the *barre* behind her in an *arabesque*[94] position.

[94] Position where the body is supported on one leg, with the other leg extended horizontally backward

[Figure 14] Edgar Degas, Plate 13: *Danseuse à la barre*, From *Edgar Degas, Vingt dessins: 1861-1896*. Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago.

[Figure 15] Edgar Degas, *Danseuses à la Barre*, c. 1876-77, pastel on paper.

These drawing also show Degas's understanding of balletic technique as each figure has her body in alignment, their hips are squared with a proper turn out of their legs, and have their feet pointed. The figures in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 15] are almost an exact copy of *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] with a major exception. *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 15] shows a full room in which the dancers and the *barre* are placed, and the dancers are clearly a part of the same composition. In contrast, the figures in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] are not placed within a room but are seen as floating figures with only a fragment of the *barre* shown and are unconnected to one another. While Degas decided to connect these two figures in a painting, in his original preparatory drawings these two dancers are not connected within a composition, and each figure could have been placed or used in a multitude of ways. He did not just use

one compositional template for each position but would combine multiple balletic positions into one compositional painting, giving a more realistic representation of the dancer's lives in the Paris Opéra classroom and rehearsal spaces.

The position of the right figure in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] also appears in *The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier* [Figure 2]. Slightly to right of the dancer in the *croisé derrière* position, there is a dancer stretching on the bar with her left leg propped up on the *barre* in front of her. This is almost a direct copy of the right figure in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] with one slight difference. In *The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier* [Figure 2] the dancer's torso is straight with one hand on her hip and the other on her leg, seeming to have just finished her stretch, while in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14], the dancer is bent over her leg seeming to be in the middle of this stretch. *The Dancing Lesson* [Figure 16] has a figure in the background of the composition that also seems to be an almost exact copy of the right figure in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14], the only difference being the placement of the arms. In *The Dancing Lesson* [Figure 16] both of the dancers are placed on the *barre* and as she is leaning over in her stretch whereas the figure in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14], has one arm on her ankle and the other on the *barre.* Degas not only integrated figures drawn in preparatory sketches into multiple different compositions, but also changed minute details. The slight changes to these figures, like the variations of the right figure in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14], creates a more realistic depiction of a ballet class. As the dancers move, stretch, and change positions details- such as the exact position of

the dancers' arms vis-à-vis the *barre*- will change and by acknowledging these changes in his paintings, Degas illustrates the physical realities of the dancers' daily routine.

[Figure 16] Edgar Degas, *The Dancing Lesson*, c. 1880. Oil on canvas, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Massachusettes.

This also demonstrates how closely he observed the dancers' routines and movements and practiced depicting them in different ways.

The right figure stretching over her left leg in *Danseuse à la barre* [Figure 14] can once again be seen in *Dancers Practicing in the Foyer* [Figure 17], only this time with no change from the original drawing. However, another position, the *à la seconde en l'air*, is depicted in this painting alongside the figure stretching on the *barre*. This combining of multiple positions in one composition is a technique that Degas used often as a way of creating a more complex composition, and as a way of illustrating a realistic Paris Opéra ballet classroom. *The Dance School* [Figure 13] and the *Ballet Rehearsal* [Figure 11] are other examples of this combination of the *à la seconde en l'air* position

combined with a figure stretching on the *barre*, but there is another technique Degas is using in both of these paintings. He is not only showing repetition of the ballet position,

[Figure 17] Edgar Degas, *Dancers Practicing in the Foyer*, c. 1875-1900, oil on canvas.

but of the exact scene, which reflects the repetition of the ballet dancers' routine from day to day.

Another strategy Degas uses to demonstrate the repetition of the dancers' daily routine is integrating figures from an earlier painting into another composition. *Danseuses à la Barre* [Figure 18] portrays two dancers in an *à la seconde en l'air* position at the *barre*, both displaying body alignment, turn out, and even hips, one in front of the other. These dancers are seen at a relatively close angle and are the only figures in the composition. In *The Dancing Lesson* [Figure 16], the room is seen at a much wider angle,

allowing the viewer to see multiple dancers all participating in different aspects of their daily routine. In the foreground there are dancers sitting, putting on pointe shoes, and fanning themselves. In the background there are dancers working at the *barre*, one leaning over her left leg that is placed on the *barre,* one is blocked by a dancer in the foreground, and the other two are in the *à la seconde en l'air* position with one directly in front of the other. These figures are in the same balletic position and in the same position spatially to one another as the two figures in *Danseuses à la Barre* [Figure 18]. Not only does this integration of figures from an earlier painting into another composition show how Degas is repeating and practicing depicting different balletic positions, it also gives the viewer a visual repetition that reflects the repetition of the dancers' daily routines.

[Figure 18] Edgar Degas, *Danseuses à la Barre*, c. 1877-79, pastel on paper.

One interpretation of Degas's process in creating his dancer paintings has been to suggest that the artist was using photographs taken of dancers practicing in the classroom and rehearsals as reference. However, it is well documented that photography did not enter Degas' process until the late 1890s.[95] In Degas's *catalogue raisonné* there are only three photographs of dancers that are dated to 1895 to 1896.[96] These three photographs are attributed as a basis for numerous paintings and pastels of the late 1890s. However, he already had decades of observation of dancers in class, at rehearsal, and in private sessions in his studio before he began to use photography as an artistic medium.[97] While it is possible that official photographs like those of *Elise Parent in L'Etoile de Messine* [Figure 19] and *Louise Fiocre in Sémiramis* [Figure 20] may have been a tool used by Degas, as a reference for costuming or balletic technique, as I have demonstrated, it was not the main process by which he created his dancer images.

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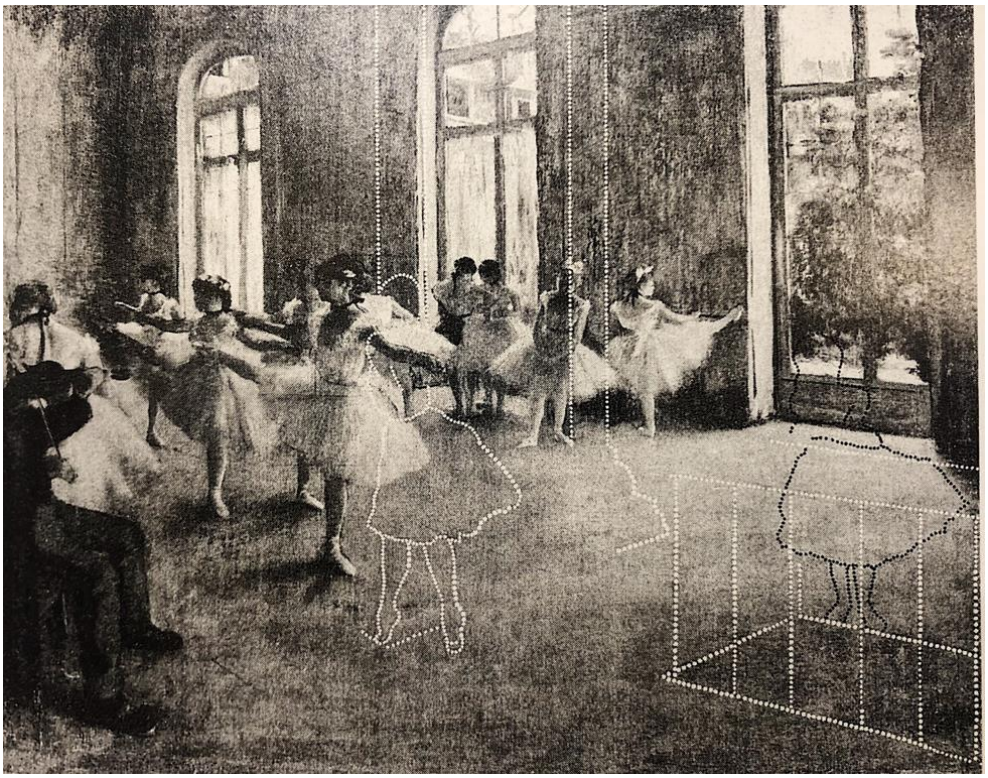
[95] Malcom Daniel, Eugenia Parry, and Theodore Reff, *Edgar Degas: Photographer*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998) 136-137.
[96] Malcom Daniel, Eugenia Parry, and Theodore Reff, *Edgar Degas: Photographer*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998) 136-137.
[97] Malcom Daniel, Eugenia Parry, and Theodore Reff, *Edgar Degas: Photographer*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998) 136-137.

[Figure 19] *Elise Parent in L'Etoile de Messine*, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[Figure 20] *Louise Fiocre in Sémiramis*, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Aside from extended knowledge of the dancers' daily routines and balletic technique, which would not have been possible to glean through just photographs, Degas's reworking of his paintings show that he was creating artistic compositions based on his understanding of the inner workings of the Paris Opéra ballet. The twenty paintings Degas created of the ballet's classroom were "laboriously prepared, emerging from an intricate process of drawing from life and subsequent transfer to canvas, often

followed by a modification of the image on the painted surface."[98] As seen in Figure 21, major aspects of the painting was changed such as the inclusion and exclusion of different figures and elements of the architecture changed, even though in this cycle of classroom paintings almost half seem to be set in the same room.[99]



[Figure 21] Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsal*, c. 1873-78, with dotted lines indicating alterations to the composition evident through infrared examination (white) and x-ray examination (black). Larger diameter points indicate obvious visible outlines; smaller diameter points indicate areas where the location of the underlying elements is more hypothetical.

Along with the remaking and reinvention of figures and architecture the repetition of balletic position across many of these classroom paintings show his

[98] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas Backstage," 80.
[99] DeVonyar and Kendall, "Degas Backstage," 80- 87.

continued interest in those specific positions in the daily routines of the dancers. Had Degas simply copied photos of the dancers at work in the classroom, these patterns of interest and the remaking of architecture would not have featured so heavily in this series of images. Lastly, there is no evidence of any photographs taken of dancers in the classroom or rehearsal spaces at that time, only official portraits of famous ballerinas.

In his twenty paintings of the Paris Opéra Ballet classroom and rehearsals from 1870 to 1880, Degas captured the essence of the Paris Ballet by creating detailed narrative scenes that had a visual basis in reality by intertwining the ballet technique Degas had learned while observing the dancers with the dancer's daily routines and interactions. Throughout Degas's *catalogue raisonné* there are hundreds of sketches and dozens of paintings of the Paris Opéra ballerinas, reworked, copied, and re-drafted that reveal his process hinged on observation, repetition, and correction. This process mirrors how the Paris Opéra ballerinas learned to dance; first by observing those who had already mastered balletic technique, second by practicing the technique themselves with intense repetitiveness, and lastly correcting themselves as they practice until they achieve mastery. The structure of ballet classes lent themselves to how dancers perfected their craft, a repetitiveness and practice of the fundamentals of balletic technique, which was also reflected in Degas's compositional choices in his depictions of the Paris Opéra ballet classroom.

Degas's connection to the dancers' process of learning and their daily routines displays the importance of researching dance history in conjunction with researching other aspects of Degas's life when addressing his dancer images. Without understanding

the exact environment in which Degas was observing and drawing inspiration from and process he went through to create his images, understanding his dancer paintings becomes less clear. Questions of who, what, where, when, and why are almost impossible to fully answer without first understanding the question of how. The history of dance is integral to understanding Degas's process in creating his dancer paintings and should be investigated further, not only in relation to Degas's dancer images, but in relation to any artist who drew inspiration from the dancers of their time. Without the combination of art historical visual analysis of Degas's dancer paintings, dance history, and my own knowledge of ballet technique as a dancer of twenty years, I would not have been able to reconstruct the process Degas utilized to depict the repertoire of the Paris Opéra ballet. My interdisciplinary methodology gave insights that I would have been unable to glean through a traditional art historical approach and reveals the importance of using interdisciplinary research methods.

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