

# The Dancing Class by Edgar Degas

## Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on Canvas
- Date: Between 1871 and 1874
- Size: 85 x 75 cm
- Location: The Musée d'Orsay, Paris
- Style: Impressionism
- Genre: Genre Painting
- This painting is also sometimes called The Ballet Class, The Dance Class, or La Classe de Danse
- The instructor is Jules Perrot, one of the best-known dancers and ballet masters in Europe. He was retired at the time. Notice he is wearing ballet shoes and leaning on his wooden stick. He is the focus of the dancers' attention and the principle character in the painting.
- The dancers are the young ballerinas of the Paris Opera.
- A very similar painting by the same name hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY.
- This painting is like a snapshot, which was very a unusual way to compose a painting at that time. Notice that several figures have half of them not in the painting.
- Degas frequently visited the rehearsal room to observe and draw the ballerinas as they practiced. He would take his work back to his studio where he would finish.
- Here the class is coming to an end. The pupils are exhausted. They are stretching, twisting to scratch their backs, adjusting their hair, clothes, an earring, or a ribbon, and paying little heed to the inflexible teacher.
- Degas closely observed the most spontaneous, natural, ordinary gestures, the pauses when concentration is relaxed and the body slumps after the exhausting effort of practicing and the implacable rigor of the class. He liked to depict the body in the middle of movement.
- The slightly raised viewpoint looking diagonally across the studio accentuates the vanishing perspective of floorboards. Paul Valéry wrote: "Degas is one of the very few painters who gave the ground its true importance. He has some admirable floors". This is all the more appropriate for dancers in that the parquet, which was moistened to prevent slipping, is their main work tool.
- Not all the ballerinas are shown as being graceful.
- The older ones in the back are their mothers or chaperones.
- A dog is seen looking at his reflection in a watering can. The watering can was used to sprinkle water on the wood floor so the dancers would not slip.
- Notice the girl is sitting on a piano.
- Notice the girl adjusting her earring behind the girl who is scratching her back.
- The dancer in the center is concentrating as she performs a classic ballet position for the instructor. She is framed by the doorway.
- X-rays of the painting showed that the dancer in the foreground was initially painted facing forward, but that Degas painted over the figure and switched it to show her back instead.
- Asymmetrical design has the whole bottom right empty space while the upper left is full.

## Artist Facts

- Edgar Degas: Pronounced (Edgar Day-Gah)
- Born July 19, 1834
- Died 1917 (age 83)
- He was a famous French artist who created paintings, drawings, sculpture and photography.
- Degas lived his whole life in a neighborhood in Paris called Montmartre.
- Degas came from a rich family. He was the oldest of five children.
- As a boy, his father often took him to visit art galleries.
- Degas was very smart and his father wanted him to become a lawyer, but in his early years he was drawn to art and by 18 he had already turned his bedroom into an art studio. To appease his father he went to law school, but skipped class in order to spend hours copying art at the Louvre.
- With the support of his father, he went on to study art. Part of his education included three years studying in Italy.
- He wanted to show real life as he saw it happening. He always carried a sketchbook with him, and he used it to write about and draw the things he saw.
- When Degas was 38 he visited the United States. Degas painted the cotton office where his relatives worked in New Orleans. This was his first painting that was bought by an art gallery. (See *The Cotton Exchange in New Orleans*, 1873.)
- Degas was said by some to have had a brash and argumentative personality. Some said he believed an artist shouldn't have a personal life. He never married and was alone until his death.
- Initially Degas was sufficiently wealthy and did not need to sell his paintings to make money. Thus, he was uninhibited and often did things in paintings to shock or surprise the viewer. However, after the death of his father it was discovered that he owed people money and for the first time Degas needed to sell paintings. Unlike the other Impressionists that he was associated with, people liked Degas' art and he became a very successful artist during his lifetime.
- Degas lost his eyesight sometime between 1909-1912 due to an injury he had suffered in war many years earlier. After he lost his eyesight he continued to sculpt.
- Degas was considered a master at drawing lines.
- He had a deep respect for hard-working women, and he painted them in their day-to-day work.
- Some of Degas' favorite subjects were women working, women bathing, ballerinas and horses.
- Degas is probably best known for his ballerinas. He painted ballerinas at work, in rehearsal or at rest, and he tirelessly explored the theme with many variations in posture and gesture. More than the stage performance and the limelight, it was the training and rehearsals that interested him.
- Some say Degas hated the fact that he was known as the "painter of dancers." Still, he did return to this theme throughout his career.
- Photography was invented during his lifetime. When he was about 60, he bought a camera and began taking photographs. Sometimes he would trace over the photographs to get the movements of the dancers right.
- Degas studied photographs to figure out the correct way to paint a horse running.
- Degas only ever exhibited one sculpture, but after his death about 150 wax sculptures were discovered in his studio.
- Degas preferred to work in his studio rather than outdoors like most Impressionists at the time.

- Degas collected artwork from painters such as Pissarro, Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh.
- Degas was friends with fellow painter Edouard Manet. Degas painted a picture of Manet and his wife as a gift. He was very angry when he found Manet cut out the entire right side of the painting because he did not like. (see *Monsieur and Madame Edouard Manet* in the packet.)
- Degas was a perfectionist and never seemed satisfied with his art. He was known to keep working on some paintings even after he sold them. One story claims that a friend chained his Degas painting to the wall to stop Edgar from taking it back to his studio whenever he came to visit.
- Degas is one of the most beloved artists of all time.

### Key Element of Design to Teach

- **Line** is a mark on a surface that defines a shape or outline. Lines may be drawn or implied. They may be straight or curvilinear. They can create texture and be made thick or thin. Lines are often used to wrap around objects to make shapes. They can be horizontal, vertical and diagonal. Lines are usually used to take the viewer's eye around and through a composition.

### Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Line

- What lines do you see in this painting? Have students come to the whiteboard and draw a straight line, a curvilinear line, a thick line, a thin line, a horizontal line, a vertical line and a diagonal line. Have them identify similar lines in the painting.
- Explain that lines wrap around things to make shapes.
- Have all the students all look at your nose. Tell them there is an invisible implied line between your faces. Show that in the painting all the girls looking at the instructor create an implied line that makes you look at him.
- The lines in this painting help take you around the painting. (They make a triangle.)
- Show the additional Degas painting in the packet. Talk about how the lines create texture in the woman's clothing and the wood.

### Keywords

- Line, Texture, Perspective

### Other Possible Questions and Suggestions

- Have you ever seen a photograph with someone's head cut off? Degas painted several people with parts of them cropped off in this painting. Can you see them? Why do you think he did this? (Photography had just been invented and Degas was very interested in it. He wanted to make his painting seem like a snapshot and that the people were in the middle of something rather than posing and saying "cheese".)
- Who do you think the women in the back are? (Mothers and Chaperones)
- Tell the story of Degas painting a picture for Manet and Manet cutting off the part he didn't like. The painting is in the packet.
- Explain that Degas was a perfectionist and often painted over his work until he got it the way he wanted it. Tell the story of his friend chaining his painting to the wall. Point out the figure in the foreground with her back to the viewer. Explain that today x-rays can show what is underneath the top layer of paint, and that Degas first painted the girl facing forward. He actually changed many of the figures in the painting.