

Girl at Ironing Board by Edgar Degas

Print Facts

- Medium: Pastel or Chalk on Paper
- Date: 1869
- Size: 29 ½ " X 24"
- Location: Musee du Louvre in Paris, France
- Period:
- Style: Impressionism
- Genre: Portrait
- This artwork is pastel or chalk on paper. He used very little blending in this work but left broad strokes and lines.
- Because it was created with pastels or chalk, this is called a drawing instead of a painting.

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 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 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 Idea to Teach

- **Portrait:** A portrait is a likeness of someone but can also tell you something about the subject. Portrait painting is a genre in painting, where the intent is to depict the visual appearance of the subject. Besides human beings, animals, pets and even inanimate objects can be chosen as the subject for a portrait. Portraitists create their work by commission, for public and private persons, or are inspired by admiration or affection for the subject. Portraits are often important state and family records, as well as remembrances. Historically, portrait paintings have primarily memorialized the rich and powerful. Over time, however, it became more common for middle-class patrons to commission portraits of their families and colleagues. Today, the portrait painting is still commissioned by governments, corporations, groups, clubs, and individuals.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach About Portrait

- What can you tell about this woman from this portrait?
- What do you think she's thinking?
- What might her personality be like?
- The additional painting in the packet shows a portrait Degas did of his friend and fellow artist Victoria Dubourg. He rarely made portraits on commission, but he painted portraits of family and friends. Notice her hands clasped in front of her and not hidden at all. Hands are very difficult to paint realistically. Degas had to be a skilled painter to pull it off.

Keywords

- Portrait, line, color, medium

Other Possible Questions and Suggestions

- Cover the woman's skirt. What colors do you see in this painting? Uncover the girl's skirt. Now what colors do you see?
- Can you guess what the artist used to create this work? Do you see brushstrokes?
- Do you think this woman was wealthy or poor?
- Why do you think the artist chose to keep this work so simple?
- This would be a good opportunity to take in the different examples of mediums artists use to paint or draw with.