

BALLET SCHOOL Edgar Degas, 1834 – 1917

Suggested Costume

Comfortable work-out clothes. There is also a child's tutu and ballet toe shoes that you can display or have a volunteer from the class wear.

Introduction

Have a class volunteer (or you) pretend to be a ballet dancer and demonstrate the 5 ballet positions (refer to handout). As you are performing the positions, ask the class, "What kind of dance is being done?" (*ballet*).

Or, if the artist presentation follows the lesson on Tchaikovsky, you can open by asking, "What do you think today's composer, Tchaikovsky, and artist, Edgar Degas (Duh-gah) had in common?" (*They were both interested in ballet*).

About the Artist

Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas (Duh-gah) was born in Paris, France in 1834 and was the eldest of five children. His mother died when he was fourteen, a tragedy he never forgot. His father was a successful banker who was devoted to music and the theater. He initially wanted his eldest son to be a lawyer but soon realized his son was gifted and encouraged his artistic inclinations. Coming from an upper middleclass family, Degas did not suffer the financial problems that plagued many of his contemporaries. In 1855, at the age of 21, he enrolled at the famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts or School of Fine Arts in Paris, and traveled extensively.

Initially, Degas executed "history paintings" or works with historical or biblical themes. Soon, however, Degas began to shift his focus to depictions of life in contemporary Paris. By 1862, he had begun painting various scenes from the racecourse, including studies of horses. Degas was concerned with nature of movement, condition of muscular activity as in a horse or dancer. Degas' style after the early 1860s was influenced by the budding Impressionist movement, including his friendship with Edouard Manet who painted "The Fifer". Along with his work painting scenes from the racetrack, Degas began concentrating on portraits of groups, most notably of female ballet dancers who became Degas' most famous subjects.

Unlike his fellow Impressionist like Monet, Renoir, Pissarro who were concerned with observing effects of light and atmosphere on landscapes, Degas was attracted to urban life in Paris – the world of theatres, cafes, opera, and ballet and chose people at work as his subjects, such as ballet dancers. Also unlike the Impressionists, Degas preferred to work in a studio as opposed to outside.

Degas was a master of psychological insight. He read aspects of human behavior well and captured it in his paintings. One of his earlier paintings was *Portraits in an Office*. He portrayed his brothers as idlers – Rene reading the newspaper and Achilles leaning against a window sill. Some has seen this as a premonition of the family's late bankruptcy that evaporated the Degas family fortune and forced the painter to live in strained circumstances the rest of his life.

He was a formidable, difficult character who never married. He lacked sympathy for people, claiming that the burden of settling his family's ruined business affairs stripped him of what little compassion he had possessed as a young man.

Sometime in the 1870s, Degas began to suffer a loss of vision, which limited his ability to work (Remember how Monet's painting of the bridge over the pond changed in color with his failing eyesight?). He began to work more as a sculptor, producing bronze statues of horses and ballet dancers, among other subjects. As Degas' eyesight grew worse, he became an increasingly reclusive and eccentric figure. In the late years of his life, he was almost totally blind. He died in 1917 in Paris, at 83, most likely of natural causes.

Most of his large output of over 2,000 paintings and pastels are now in the Louvre and in major American galleries, notably the Metropolitan Museum.

Painting: "Ballet School"

Although Degas liked to capture and paint ballet dancers behind the scenes rehearsing, waiting or practicing, interestingly, he preferred to dress his dancers in traditional tutus as opposed to the mundane "work-out" garb they more likely wore. The figure in the foreground is wrapped in a red garment to keep her muscles warm. This is perhaps Degas' only attempt at reality in clothing in this dance class.

His early interest in photography influenced the way he painted. His paintings show unexpected angles and limbs cut off at the edges of the painting (refer to dancers' legs descending staircase on left side of painting and a dancer's body cut off on right front). Do you feel as though the room has been put on pause? If you took the "camera" off pause, could you imagine the noise and action? Degas is famous for the amount of action captured in his paintings.

The painting is not balanced as traditional paintings might be. The group of dancers and splash of red at the right front seem to "weight" the canvas. But Degas provides balance at the other side by painting large, bright areas of light on the floor and the dark staircase.

Where is the light coming from? (*Windows in both the front and back room*). Does the light cause any reflection? (*On the toe shoes by the bench, in the center, on the satin sashes*.) This painting shows the effect of light more than the source of it.

Degas was very interested in the **LINES** of the subjects he painted. Are the lines of the dancers' bodies curved or straight? When Degas was a very young artist he met Ingres (a very famous painter) who told him, "Draw lines, young man, many lines, from memory and nature; it is in this way that you will become a good artist." Degas took the advice so seriously that in some of his paintings, he used a plumb line! (A plumb line is a tool with a weight hung at the end of a string or line, used to determine if a wall is exactly vertical).

Art Exercise

Grades 1-3: Use small sheet handouts of different ballet positions on FAME cart. Have students turn sheet over to the back (blank side) and trace the form of the dancer. This is an exercise in drawing curved lines of ballet dancers as Degas did. They can also color and dress up the dancer (add tutu/toe shoes) on the front if there is time.

Grades 4-6

Pass out copies of sheet with 5 dancers demonstrating the ballet positions (please have students return these sheets to you so that it can be used for another class). Provide students with scratch paper on FAME cart. Have students sketch one of these positions on the scratch papers. This is an exercise in drawing curved lines of ballet dancers as Degas did.