Edgar Degas

Images
**Edgar Degas**

**The Presentation**

1. **Self Portrait**  
   c.1863, oil on canvas, 36" x 26", Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

   This self-portrait was painted when Degas was 29 years old. It shows him as an aloof, melancholy young man. The painting reflects the cool and intellectual Neo-Classical influence of Jean-Auguste Ingres, his mentor, who recommended that he “draw lines, young man, many lines…” Degas developed his drawing ability from Ingres, and this very vertical composition is broken only by the hand and arm gestures. The diagonal lines of the hand holding the hat and the other bent arm lend a sense of movement and naturalism to the painting. Degas is known for his study of gestures and poses of human figures in interior settings.

2. **The Orchestra at the Opera**  
   1868-9, oil on canvas, 22" x 18", Musée d’Orsay, Paris

   This was Degas’ first depiction of the opera and is essentially a group portrait. Most of the people are actually Degas’ friends and acquaintances. Each face is a portrait and the main figure in the foreground is Desire Dihau, the bassoonist. Even though not all the men are really musicians, the poses and gestures are authentic. The composition is rather original because he added the dancers to the opera scene, but he cut them off at the top (cropping). The very masculine musicians, dressed in black and white, dominate the foreground and contrast with the colorful dancers who are shown without faces so as not to distract from the main subject. The overhead view from which we see the orchestra pit and the artificial stage light are two favorite Degas devices used here.

   The entire composition is connected through various types of line. There are three broad horizontal lines separating the composition into three distinct areas: the audience, the orchestra and the ballerinas on stage. The spectators in the foreground are separated from the orchestra by the large velvet railing which crisscrosses the painting. The large shape of Mr. Dihau in the center is holding a diagonal instrument, which leads our eye to the gentleman in the chair. Although his back is towards us, the instrument he holds forms a diagonal line leading us to the ballerinas on stage. The gestural lines of their arms and legs give us a sense of movement. Repetition of the shapes of the heads in the orchestra, coupled with the repeated diagonal lines of their bows, give a feeling of movement in the orchestra. The shape of the chair-back in the foreground is repeated in the shape of the stage wall, tying those two items together along an implied diagonal line, which passes directly over the head of the main figure in the composition. Degas has carefully planned this very complex scene of portraits and anonymous dancers to give us a spontaneous “snapshot” of contemporary Parisian life.
3. **Musicians in the Orchestra**  
1872, oil on canvas, 27” x 19”, Stadelisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt

Originally painted in 1870, Degas added a seven-inch strip to the top of the canvas which allowed him to change the composition. His dancers were now shown full length, rather than cropped, and they, not the orchestra, became the primary subject. The musicians are seen from behind, reflecting Degas’ use of unusual viewpoints. Degas repeats the shape of the top of the instrument in the foreground in the man’s ear and reinforces the idea that we are listening to music being played. The extreme close-up view puts the spectator directly in the orchestra pit with the musicians, viewing the stage and dancers from below as they are lit by the spotlights. The repetition of the colors in the costumes, as well as the gestural lines of the arms and legs of the dancers, lend a sense of visual movement to the left side of the stage. The main dancer on the right is shown in a dynamic pose with her outstretched arms forming diagonal lines leading up to her face and down to the musicians. This connects the orchestra to the ballerina and ties the composition together.

4. **The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans**  
1873, oil on canvas, 29” x 36”, Musée des Beaux Art, Pau, France

During a visit to his American relatives in New Orleans, Degas painted them in a group portrait at work in the cotton exchange. His grandfather, wearing the glasses, is seated in the foreground; his brother Achille, stands on the left leaning against the wall and his brother René is reading the newspaper. He even repeats the poses of the brother, René, and the grandfather in the chairs. The man on the right looking at a ledger is repeated in the background in the identical pose. Their natural poses are set in a composition of rectangular (shape) repetitions within the rectangular-shaped office.

The vertical lines of the rectangular windows bring our eyes down to the figures and the cotton on the table. Here Degas used a trick learned from Japanese prints; he elevated the floor slightly at the far end, which allowed everyone’s head to show clearly. He leads the eye by repeating the white of their clothing, paper and cotton, and he juxtaposed the white with the black to reinforce our attention. These black areas are spaced evenly across the composition like notes on a musical score, giving the painting a visual rhythm. By cropping the figures at the outer edges of the painting, he achieves a sense of spontaneity and the feeling that we glimpse them in a fleeting moment of movement.
5. **At the Café Concert (Les Ambassadeurs)**
1875, pastel over monotype, 15” x 11”; Musée d’Orsay, Paris

In this painting Degas repeated the viewpoint and composition of “Orchestra at the Opera” with the **shape** of the neck of the double bass protruding from the orchestra pit in front of the performers and a view of the stage from the first few rows. This scene is actually outdoors, but the lighting and cropping lead you to believe it’s an interior setting. Café concerts were held on warm summer evenings in outdoor bandstands. At first, the audience may appear a confused jumble, but notice how the eye is led to the main singer on the stage by the shape of the bass instrument and the color of her bright red dress. Degas has placed her slightly off-center, but the row of round lights directly in the center of the composition leads us to the singer and continues in the gestural line of her outstretched arm, creating visual **movement**. Similarly, the two strong vertical lines of the pillars lead to the two main figures on the stage. Again the composition is divided into three horizontal bands: the audience, the orchestra and the stage, all linked together by the **repetition** of colors and shapes. The red repeats in the singer’s bow, the blue performer’s bow and then in the audience with the orange-red hat and the red bow next to it. Hat shapes are repeated in the audience and in the orchestra.

Where did the artist repeat colors in this painting?

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**Ballet Scenes**

Degas created about 1500 ballet drawings, paintings, pastels and sculptures. He was enchanted by the costumes, the colors, the textures and the accessories. The theatrical stage lighting appealed to him and he tried to show the “effect of light” as opposed to the source of light. He wasn’t interested in recording a specific person, event or location. He was more concerned with the backstage, the rehearsal studio, and the classes before the actual performances. He admired the hard-working young dancers and the repetition necessary for perfection. They were one of his favorite subjects because it allowed him to show movement. He spent many hours sketching their moves and poses and assembled them like a puzzle back in his studio. Over the years he simplified his compositions by reducing the number of dancers from 10 or more to 3 or 4 at most. He also moved from oils to pastels and sculpture. He even changed the angles used from the bird’s eye viewpoint to up-close formats.
6. **End of Arabesque (Dancer Bowing)**  
1876-77, tempera and pastel on canvas, 38” x 15”, Musée d’Orsay, Paris

This painting is the perfect example of Degas’ belief that “the dancer was the pretext for painting beautiful fabrics and rendering movement.” The dancer bowing after the arabesque fills almost the entire composition. The placement of a large figure in the foreground is typical for Degas as is the cropping of the image on the right. We view her slightly from above, yet she is illuminated from below. Degas was fascinated by the stage lighting reflected off the dancer in the bright, warm yellow of her tutu. To emphasize this warm light, Degas used distinct yellow lines and strokes on her costume. Her elongated shape and pose give a sense of **movement** along the diagonal gestural **line** formed by her arms. Note how they act as an arrow pointing to her face and then up to the other dancers. The **shape** of the bouquet of flowers wrapped in the paper is repeated in the shape of her head surrounded by the bodice of her costume. Visual movement and rhythm is created in the back of the stage through the **repetition** of poses, color of costumes, and shapes of the heads.

7. **SCANNING: The Rehearsal**  
1877, oil on canvas, 30” x 39”, Burrell Collection, Glasgow

In Degas’ rehearsal and stage scenes, the diagonal **line** becomes the predominant compositional device, often seen in the floorboards. We focus on the floor because it is the large void in the center of the composition. As is typical of Degas’ compositions, there is a large figure in the foreground, with two overlapping figures next to it. One of the figures is covered by the dancer in front of her, and the dancer herself is cropped by the edge of the canvas. This device, borrowed from photography, lends spontaneity to the work. Their faces are not important, however their gestures and poses are.

Degas repeats a pose and shape side by side in the two dancers in the background. The shape of the windows **repeats** across the rear of the room, bathing the room in bright sunlight. This is a rare use of natural light in an interior setting. Notice the strong vertical lines repeated in the windows as well as the railing of the stairs. These vertical lines on the stairs almost mask the legs of the girl descending the steps, while the entire staircase cuts off the dancer standing behind it. Only a part of her tutu and her legs are visible. The spiral shape of the staircase reminds us of a dancer spinning in a pirouette, lending a sense of **movement** by implication. The diagonal gestural lines of the dancers next to the stairs move our eye to the next figure, the dance master. The strong vertical line of his body leads us to the lady in red bent over behind the dancer in a similar pose. This dancer’s feet are repeated in the seated dancer’s pose. Through visual movement we’ve come full circle around this very horizontal composition.
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Scanning Questions

The Rehearsal
1877, oil on canvas, 30" x 39", Burrell Collection, Glasgow

Art Elements: What you see.

Line
- Are the lines vertical, horizontal, or diagonal? (All three.)
- Describe the other types of lines you see. (Compositional, gestural.)

Shape
- Which colors are the brightest in this painting? (The warm colors—yellow, red and orange) Which colors are the most subdued? (The greens and blues in the background.)
- Which figures are the most important in this painting? (Those that have been painted with the brightest, warmest hues.)

Art Principles: How the elements are arranged.

Movement
- What areas show the most movement? (The dancers in the center of the room.)
- How did the artist emphasize this area? (He placed the dancers in the center of the painting next to the large empty area of the floor.)

Repetition
- Can you find any lines which repeat? (Floorboards, the gestures of the dancers, the vertical window frames, etc.)
- Can you find a pose which repeats in this painting? (The two dancers in the background.)

Technical Properties: How it was made.
- What materials did the artist use to create this work? (Oil paint, canvas and brushes)
- Did he paint it on the spot, or do you think he made it up in his studio?

Expressive Properties: How it makes you feel.
- How do you think the dancers feel? Why?
- Do you think the artist liked the dancers and the teacher?
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8. **Little Dancer, Age 14**
   1880-81, bronze, tulle skirt, satin ribbon, height 39", Metropolitan Museum, New York City

Degas experimented with many media and turned to sculpture during the later part of his life. In the absence of a model he used sculpture to recapture a dancer’s gestures, volumes and proportions. At first they were more reminders for use in his paintings, but as his eyesight began to deteriorate, Degas turned increasingly to sculpture as his primary medium.

This sculpture of a young dancer, Mary Von Gerten at age fourteen, is one of 20 bronze versions of the original wax sculpture. It is dressed with real slippers, a tulle tutu and a silk ribbon. The shocking realism of this sculpture caused confusion when the public saw it. This was the only sculpture Degas exhibited publicly during his lifetime. He made at least sixteen studies of her in charcoal, chalk and pastel prior to this fully clothed version. Her pose is very dynamic, anchored along the vertical supporting leg. We follow the line of her outstretched leg up to her face. Her head is tilted backwards and leads us down the line of her ponytail to her arm and back down the vertical line of the standing leg. Our eyes move around her form in a definite planned fashion. The repetition of the folds in her tutu, and the actual fabric itself, lend a sense of realism and rhythm to the piece.

9. **Dancer Adjusting Her Dress**
   1881, pastel, 24” x 12”, Portland Art Museum, Oregon

Degas moved to pastels as a medium because he was able to work more quickly than with oils. He enjoyed the freedom the medium afforded and experimented with layering, fixatives, blending, and mixing media. He often used charcoal for outlines or contour lines and added pastel for color and tone. White was used for highlighting as in this piece, done on tinted paper. He used a limited color palette but retained many characteristic compositional features. The composition contains a single off-center figure against a large void. The contour lines of her body and costume are very evident, with her costume full of repeated hatch lines. We do not see her face, since for Degas the person is not as important as her movement, pose and gesture.


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10. **Seated Dancer**  
1881-3, pastel on paper, 24" x 19", Musée d’Orsay, Paris

This pose repeats in any number of Degas works. The sharply descending angle of vision is very evident here. By viewing her pose from above, one can almost feel how she is weighed down with tension and fatigue. Using only a few colors, including black to outline the figure, Degas has brought to life an “impression he stored in his memory.” He often selected paper that was tinted (brown here) and of varying degrees of roughness. Degas used pastels so he could work quickly and return as often as he wished to make changes. Note the number of layers of pastel he used on the dancer's costume. The dancer is a positive shape and the layers of color add to her solid appearance. The negative shapes of the floor and wall are achieved with simple lines or hatchings. The line of her head, back, and flowing skirt is repeated in the bright blue bow, creating visual movement across the composition. Her legs mimic the chair legs and it almost seems like they are only thing which actually supports her.

11. **Jockeys in Front of the Stands**  
c.1879, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", Musée d’Orsay, Paris

Horse racing was the most fashionable spectator sport of Parisian high society in the Impressionists’ day. For Degas, the movement of the racehorse was a major theme. He produced 45 paintings, 20 pastels, 250 drawings, and 17 sculptures of racehorses. He used sketches and photography to enhance his understanding of the poses and movement inherent in this genre. These racecourse pieces are some of the few open-air paintings that Degas executed.

Degas preferred to depict the moments before the race began, when the individual movements of the horses could be seen most clearly. This is a typical composition with the large void in the center; the subjects are placed off-center and cropped at the edges of the painting. The foreground is foreshortened and contains one large figure. In this unusual viewpoint, note how the jockey replaces the horses’ unseen neck and head. Degas repeats the color brown in the rider and in the horse, unifying them into one unit of movement. The crowd in the grandstand on the left is portrayed with only a flat wash of color and a few essential lines; clearly the crowd is not the subject here. The heavy contour lines of the horses’ legs and their shapes repeated in the shadows indicate that they are the subjects, along with their colorfully clad riders. Note how the row of horses and the lines of their legs on the right are repeated in the lines of the railing on the left. A sense of forward motion and depth are achieved as we visually enter the racetrack scene.
12. Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando
1879, oil on canvas, 46” x 30 1/2”, National Gallery, London

This painting of a circus performer was based on at least four sketches, but the odd viewpoint and the idea of recording the twirling figure hanging by her teeth were inspired by photography. Degas shows us a spectator’s view, gazing up at Miss La La. To emphasize the soaring perspective, he places her high up in the corner of the composition. This off-center composition is one of his trademarks.

The strong vertical line of the beam and the diagonal of the rope lead the eye upward to the figure. The gestural lines of her diagonal arms and legs not only counterbalance her body, but also lend movement to the scene. Her pose allows her to occupy a greater area by extending into the space under the roof. Degas has repeated the lines of the iron roof supports in the gestural lines of La La’s arms and legs to reinforce the feeling of upward movement.

13. The Millinery Shop
1884, oil on canvas, 39” x 43”, Art Institute of Chicago

While this composition may seem very casual and spontaneous, it resulted from very careful planning in the studio. The composition is unusually tilted and suggests the viewpoint of a passerby, perhaps looking down at the milliner from the window. The subject is not the woman; she is off-center in the composition and cropped by a hat. The subject is clearly the hats. Degas repeated the hat shop theme in several of his paintings.

Note the repetition of the hats is similar to that used in “At the Café Concert.” Here the hat shapes are repeated across the entire canvas. The hat-stands blend into the shadows, making the hats almost float around the room in a swirling motion. Degas has arranged the head of the woman and the hats so that the ornate hat, with a hanging yellow-green ribbon, is positioned like a colorful floral crown over her head. The vertical line of this ribbon connects the two hats at either end. The vertical lines of the window frames in the background lead the eye down to two hats, the one over her head and the one in her hand. The gestural lines of her arms are not only natural and unposed, but lead to the hat she is making. Degas sympathized with the life of working women and began to paint them more frequently during this period.
Degas’ portrayal of working class women focused on their rhythmic muscular action, not their pathos or poverty. He depicts them at a daily task, using poses and gestures of exhaustion, and setting the figures against the diagonal lines of the table. The two women are not posing for us; they are caught in a “snapshot,” oblivious to our presence. Degas likens their poses and gestures to a machine; while one is bending down, the other is stretching up, much like the pistons in an engine. This motion repeats in the gestural lines of the woman on the left, one arm is up and stretching, the other is leading the eye downward to the water bottle used for sprinkling on the laundry. The other woman’s gestural lines reinforce the pressure and work needed to use the iron.

This up-and-down rhythm is repeated in the colors used throughout the composition. The orange of the floor next to the blue of the back wall is reversed in the orange scarf and blue skirt of the woman yawning. We are led to the orange bowl on the table and the blue skirt of the other woman, who wears an orange blouse and has reddish-orange hair. The wall behind her is blue and orange. Even though the women are posed differently, they are connected through their work rhythm and the repetition of the shapes of their bodies. The orange scarf is shaped like a “v” and the woman on the right forms a “v” shape with her arms. Even the stove on the right is similar in shape and color to the skirts of the two women, tying them to their environment, much like “Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando.”

Degas was influenced by Japanese art, where everyday life was a common motif. He liked the novel compositions as well as the cropping effect used in their art. The unusual viewpoint in this painting (this time from on high) is common to Degas, as well as the “snapshot” effect created by the pose and cropping he employed. Unlike nudes of the past that were painted as classical ideals, Degas painted his nudes in natural poses and settings, seldom showing their faces. He was more concerned with the movement of their limbs and the posture of their bodies.

Using pastels in this work allowed Degas to maintain the dramatic effects of color while emphasizing the lines inherent in the technique. We are brought into the scene by the strong vertical line of the dresser. Across the top he has arranged jugs, brushes, and a hairpiece. The colors and shapes of these objects are repeated in the left side of the composition in the woman’s hair and body. The contour lines of the jug handles are repeated in the model’s raised arm gesture. The vertical line of her other arm repeats the vertical line of the dresser, which almost crops her figure. As our eyes move from shape to shape across the composition, we skip across interruptions to create closure and a sense of visual movement. The large shape of the tub dominates the composition and the figure (emphasized by the very long contour line of the back) is the other large shape. Together, they are the focal point of the work. This is a typical Degas composition with one large figure dominating in the foreground.