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Degas's Modernism

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Abstract

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Copies of Old Masters, references to past art, repetition of figures as well as compositions, and an affinity for modern, figural subjects all characterize the œuvre of Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Despite his affiliation with the Impressionists, Degas's methods and art suggest instead participation in a new kind of modernism. First, I will address Degas's education and how a knowledge of Old Masters' methods and figuration shaped his early development. Then I will discuss Degas's choice to focus primarily on dancers and his continued commitment to traditional methods, which contrasted strongly with the Impressionists' *plein air* landscapes and relinquishment of painterly techniques. Paradoxically, Degas's employment of his predecessors' conventional methods, ranging from subjects to tired compositional formulae, allowed him to grasp fleeting moments of reality in the modern world. Ultimately, Degas developed a unique modernism, built upon repetition first through copying Old Masters, and then by continued self-citation of figures and compositions he had developed. This approach placed Degas not only within the artistic lineage of the predecessors he admired but also the modernity of his time.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Repetition as a means to originality	1
Chapter I. An education	8
Chapter II. <i>La Nouvelle Peinture</i> , Degas, and the Repetition of Artifice	43
Conclusion	71
Works cited and referenced	75

Introduction: Repetition as a means to originality

One of the defining traits of French modernist art in the nineteenth century was the effort to overcome what were felt to be increasingly inexpressive artistic conventions as they had been established by the Académie.¹ Many critics and artists expressed this dissatisfaction with the nation's art. As one critic complained in 1866, "Nothing is new, and almost everything resembles an allusion to the past."² Even prestigious history painting exhibited "mediocre invention, where one finds nothing but badly hidden references" to past art.³ Under the reign of this institution, and its later affiliate, the École des Beaux-Arts, artists were shaped by a formal educational system that by the mid-nineteenth century was felt to produce an increasingly conventional art, ruled by a hierarchy of subjects, a shared but frequently recondite visual language, and a set of predominantly narrative functions.

By the time he painted *Frieze of Dancers* (1895, Cleveland Museum of Art), Edgar Degas (1834-1917) had witnessed and experienced a series of turbulent upheavals in the French art world, namely the decline of the tradition endorsed by the Académie and the advent of

¹ The term "Académie" is in some ways a misnomer. In 1655, the "original" Académie was established. It operated until 1793, when it became the third branch of the Institut in 1795 and was thus renamed the Third Class of the Institute. In 1803, this branch became independent of the overseeing Institute body, becoming the Class of Fine Arts. During this reformation of the Académie immediately after the French Revolution, another key institution was founded: the École des Beaux-Arts. The faculty of this didactic organization, founded as part of the reforms initiated by the Revolution, were mostly members of the Institute's Fine Arts branch or Class of Fine Arts. Although this established a clear relationship between the two organizations (and despite the fact that they often occupied the same space, such as the Louvre between 1795 and 1807), they remained separate bodies. The *Institut* (or "Académie" as it was called again in the mid-nineteenth century) oversaw the curriculum of the École des Beaux-Arts, which maintained the original Academic format established the century before of drawing after a live model or plaster cast, study of anatomy and perspective, and competitions once a year. The Academy also organized the prestigious Prix-de-Rome and the annual Salons, which began in 1831. An extension of the French state to control artistic production, the Academy controlled artistic education, achieved through the École des Beaux-Arts and private instruction in an atelier (where masters taught painting, sculpture, etc.) (Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, 3-7).

² Maxime de Camp, "Le Salon de 1866," *Revue de Deux Mondes* LXIII (Jun. 1866): 687: "rien n'y est nouveau, et presque tout y semble une réminiscence."

³ de Camp, "Le Salon de 1866," 694: "l'invention médiocre, où l'on ne retrouve que des réminiscences mal déguisées."

modern art including Impressionism. But this specific work demonstrates neither signs of an abandonment of conventional painterly methods nor an adoption of the Impressionists' affinity for landscape. This work explicitly thematizes its relationship to artistic predecessors, despite its clearly modern subject of dancers. The draftsmanship championed by his idol Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and taught by the formal *École des Beaux-Arts* appears immediately with the lines and contours of the dancers' bodies, especially around the feet and arms of the two dancers at the left. The four figures—or perhaps a single dancer—sit at different angles, all in the same pose of looking downward, each adjusting the shoe on her right foot. This action, although performed by modern subjects, conjures figures from past art, such as the numerous representations of Athena adjusting her sandal, which Degas once copied during his artistic formation.

These inheritances from the art of the past soon conflict with Degas's equally strong commitment to an art of contemporary life, which necessitated a willed resistance to narrative and to qualities I will define as "theatrical." These figures occupy an amorphous, undefined space, unmarked by any indications of a floor or wall, let alone a specific studio. The abstraction of the painting, evident first in their surrounding space, also applies to the figures. Upon closer inspection, for example, the dancers do not wear toe shoes at all. Their shoes, in addition to their dance costumes, are mostly indistinguishable from their marble-like bodies. Even where Degas does use a few deft strokes to indicate a distinction, such as the contour on the back of the red-haired dancer's costume (second from the right), the separation between the figure and her dress remains ambiguous. On the same figure, her sleeve appears to meld into her upper-arm. There is no fixed source of light, as the figure on the far right sits mostly in darkness but her neighbor at the left curiously catches a light emanating from the right on her left calf. This abstract

illumination inhibits a sense of staging or the conclusion that he painted directly from life, as it obviously could be neither staged nor witnessed. Paradoxically, it is precisely through the repetition of references to the art of the past that Degas succeeded in defusing the theatrical qualities that had turned Old Master practices into inert conventions.

Theater in art, which entailed a work providing a performance for its audience in the form of explicit visual narratives, stands as the convention most abandoned by the artists of Degas's time. While viewing art is inherently a kind of spectacle, French painters since the founding of the Académie, such as Charles Le Brun, Nicolas Poussin, Jacques-Louis David, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, contributed to the development of compositional conventions. Collectively, their art promoted visual structures that included primarily staged effects, figures posing for an audience, and gestural expressions of emotion. Staging could occur through the implementation of dramatic lighting, the placement of figures within an enclosed space, the careful arrangement of subject to ensure the viewer's omniscient perspective of all figures, and a background mimicking a stage. A figure placed in such a composition immediately invites the viewer and appeals to its audience through its pose, accessibility to the viewer's regard, and action within the composition. The figure, characterized solely through pose and emotion, often bore an exaggerated expression to definitively communicate its role in the work. The fusion of these three elements created a legible moment that could be read by its viewer, enabling the artist to produce art communicating a narrative in a single, static image. The problem, as Degas saw it, was not necessarily with narrative itself, but with the failure of conventional narrative modes of production, which forced painting to aspire to theater. Especially with the development of Realism, artists began to actively refute the notion that painting held the same function as theater.

By Degas's era, many artists felt Academic modes of narrative art were merely conventional, overused, and conforming to standardized formulae. For this reason, in the second half of the nineteenth century, artistic dissidents including the Impressionists like Claude Monet abandoned the traditional methods and subjects endorsed by the formal institution altogether in order to reinvent painting. Along with their resistance to conventional techniques and methods of representation, their art abandoned the prescribed function of painting as an object of visual consumption for its audience. "Modern," in the context of this discussion, embodies this opposition to tradition, theatricality, and performance for the viewer. It also comprises a new commitment to modern life and contingency. As early as 1859, Degas conceived of the insufficiency of Academic methods and subjects to treat modern matters. "[We]...have yet to find a composition which paints our times," Degas emphatically declared in his notebook.⁴ The paradox of Degas's art was that modern forms of composition could only emerge *through* the repetition of Old Master techniques—a position that put him at odds with Realists and Impressionists, as well as the Académie. As I will argue in the second chapter, the most productive framework for understanding Degas's art is to see it within the context of his Impressionist peers.

While Degas clearly used—and explicitly references—artistic tradition, he manipulated its methods and extracted them from their conventional context to neutralize the familiarity of the image, reviving the painting that was felt to be the product of routine and inflexible formulae. His *Frieze* and depictions of dance avoided the fate of a conventional composition through its resistance to the traditional employment of standard modes of representation and its modern subject. Significantly, the repetition occurring within the composition of repeated pose and figure

⁴ As transcribed by Theodore Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), Notebook 16, p. 6: "mais...[il] reste à trouver une composition qui peigne notre temps."

(simply repeated to create four distinct dancers) reveals the primary method Degas used to achieve an original, varied, and distinct *oeuvre*. Beginning first with his adoption and repetition of Old Masters methods, Degas began to reuse compositional constructions and figures in his own original compositions. In contrast to the nascent group of landscapists who abandoned altogether the erudite methods he admired, Degas turned his attention to a subject that predicated repetition. It enabled him to use this method to depict modernity through the means of his predecessors, linking his art to the tradition so many of his peers were prepared to forfeit. Surely for this reason, painter Gustave Moreau once asked Degas, “You have then the intention of restoring art through dance?”⁵

Degas focused almost exclusively on dancers from the 1880s until the end of his career around the turn of the century. In this period, his repetition and re-employment of certain methods and figures were prolific. In fact, it proved so frequent that nearly every painting he produced featuring dance contains at least one figure that reappears in at least one other composition (or another work in a different medium, such as sculpture). Degas repeated the figural type of dancer adjusting her shoe as seen in *Frieze of Dancers*, for example, in over forty studies and works, over the course of a twenty-five-year period.⁶ For Degas, this repetition (a method learned from masters like Ingres and Poussin) was a tool for constant recombination and originality. When he began to depict his second most recognized subject—nudes or bathers—he continued this method of self-citation and often simply depicted variations of the dance figure

⁵ Paul Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 53: “Vous avez donc la prétention de restaurer l’art par la danse ?”

⁶ Briefly, from Lemoisne’s catalogue, the works are: 530, 531, 542, 599bis, 600, 658, 661, 698, 699, 826, 826bis, 900, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906,* 907, 908, 913, 941, 1067, 1069, 1107, 1144 (Cleveland’s *Frieze*), 1200, 1201, 1202, 1223, 1254, 1255, 1256, 1257, 1258, 1259, 1308, 1321, 1368, 1394, 1395, 1396, 1433, 1434, 1435, 1425bis. (*This work was mistaken at the sale of Degas’s studio for a bathing figure, as it is a study of a nude.)

types he had developed in a nude state.⁷ Like the Old Masters' imagery and methods he appropriated, this frequent repetition of his own figures forced Degas to incessantly search for new ways in method and media to reanimate used, familiar imagery to achieve modern art.

Degas's working method throughout his adult life embodied the internalized repetition the *Frieze* and his re-employment of figures depict. Although he exhibited with the Impressionists, Degas's art was influenced most by his visual knowledge of past art. From an early age, the young artist had already decided that "if one wants to take art seriously... he must go into solitude."⁸ This incredibly focused, almost martyr-like attitude towards painting reveals the commitment to artistic education and the craftsmanship necessary to create art. Even towards the end of his life, Degas continued to study the figure, seek new methods to diversify his working practice, and repeat developed or appropriated imagery to achieve original works. As his friend and art critic George Moore remembered, Degas

shut himself up all his life to draw again and again, in a hundred different combinations, only slightly varied, those few aspects of life which his nature led him to consider artistically, and for which his genius alone holds the artistic formulae.⁹

Furthermore, this approach offers a compromise between two polarized theories concerning repetition in art. On one hand, we could regard repetition as a lack of originality, imitation, mimesis, or copying. The Impressionists like Monet would have identified with this theory, as their art and pursuit of transience seeks to preserve an original, fleeting vision and escape repetition. Conversely, as post-modernists would later argue, to a certain extent all art is a

⁷ Unfortunately, in the scope of this thesis, it was impossible to also discuss Degas's other primary subject, bathers. These figures are even more openly linked to conventional imagery and tradition, through the nature of their being nudes (perhaps the most frequent Academic figural type) and the wealth of visual sources Degas could therefore repeat and reinvent. Regarding this topic, Richard Thomson's scholarship (*The Nudes*) touches on some of this repetition in his in-depth study of Degas's nudes.

⁸ Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, Notebook 6, pg. 83: "si on veut faire faire sérieusement / de l'art... / il faut se retremper dans / la solitude."

⁹ George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: David Nutt, 1891), 301.

repetition of past imagery or ideas. According to their logic, an artist cannot completely escape the practice and absolute originality cannot be readily achieved. Significantly, Degas's art demonstrates an exceptional balance of these two radical ideas. Degas's works from his copyist phase, which embodies this first concept, were a series of exercises in mimesis of Old Masters' subjects and methods. On the other hand, his prolific repetition of dancers in the latter half of his career demonstrates the post-modernists' claim that avoiding the practice is impossible. But while both arguments conclude that repetition inhibits originality, Degas succeeded in crafting original art through repetition. As the artist realized, one could not avoid composing, which repetition facilitated by establishing the tools of painterly construction. First through his copyist phase, then through his development of his own pictorial devices and typologies, Degas was able to build an *oeuvre* at once highly modern and revelatory of its artistic origins.

Possessing an erudite knowledge of art from antiquity to the Old Masters (and of all the conventional methods, techniques, repetition, and visual vocabulary it entailed), Degas proved exceptional in his dedication to and employment of this education. Instead of forfeiting tradition to escape a conventional fate and to achieve modernity, Degas utilized his knowledge and repeatedly drew from these deadened artistic conventions to grasp originality. His repetition and reuse of methods and even clichéd imagery, paradoxically, enabled Degas to develop a unique modernism and to align his art with the French painterly tradition his contemporaries loathed and he deeply admired. By repeating the methods, approaches to composition, and visual language he studied—but in unconventional ways—Degas produced art that embraced the inherent artifice of artistic medium, established new approaches to viewing, and remained intrinsically linked to artistic precedents, all the while firmly rooted in the modernity of his time.

Chapter I. An education: how a knowledge of art's conventions prepared Degas for modernity

Although he began his education at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and under the tutelage of Academic *maîtres*, Degas ultimately pursued an independent—but still conventional—formation. As early as 1853, he began to copy extensively at the Musée du Louvre. By the 1860s, he had filled his sketchbooks with diverse copies, ranging from small drawings of figures from the Parthenon's friezes to engravings by Raphael.¹⁰ With the exception of portraits, Degas's works from the 1850s through the early 1860s were predominantly copies or original compositions keyed to the subjects, figures, and formal effects of the art he studied. Degas's exacting copy of Nicolas Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines* (1637-38, Musée du Louvre), which the artist painted as he began to invent his own compositions, culminated his artistic studies and adoption of Old Masters' methods. Understanding Degas's unorthodox artistic background, which provided him with an extensive knowledge of art, forms a unique lens for analyzing his oeuvre, marked by repetition and employment of other conventional artistic methods.

Ultimately, this education through copying forced Degas to repeat and record art's artifices, ranging from pictorial typologies including figures, poses, and visual devices to methods such as draftsmanship and compositional planning. The artist's opportunity to pursue this kind of education—one self-driven by his own taste and reflection upon the art of his predecessors—distinguishes him from contemporaries. From his education, modeled after the one set by the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Degas amassed the arsenal of techniques used since the Renaissance and still taught to Academically trained artists, which placed him within the artistic lineage of those artists he admired. Through his copyist practice and studies of past art, Degas

¹⁰ Paul-André Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre* (Paris: Plon, 1954), 15.

gained an exhaustive introduction to all the unnatural methods artists used to transform artificial, disparate elements into art.

Degas's Poussin

Copying presents the first fundamental method of Degas's repetition throughout his career. Through copying—that is, repeating the art of others—he assimilated past artists' varied techniques and methods of representation into his own artistic approach. According to the Académie and curriculum of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the successful copyist would not only produce a work faithful to the original, but also produce one in the same manner as the original artist. This important facet of the practice necessitated a kind of embodiment by the copyist of the original artist in order to perform and recreate the painting's creation through the same series of operations. The Academic copy, therefore, forced the artist to engage in complete mimesis. The practice served as a link between new artists and their predecessors all the way back to antiquity.¹¹ This tradition ensured that techniques and methods passed from one generation of artists to the next, perpetuating the implementation and sharing of techniques. Delacroix notes in the *Dictionnaire des Beaux-Arts* that copying informed “nearly all the great masters,”¹² including Rubens, who achieved from this exercise an “immense savoir.”¹³ Subscribing to this Academic practice, Degas became a prolific copyist and produced over 700 copies almost entirely during the first two decades of his career.¹⁴ These copies ranged from sketches of a single figure from a larger composition to a complete reproduction of a painting. For Degas, this fundamental

¹¹ According to some historians including John Walker, copying began as early as the Renaissance with Michelangelo; he lists also Rubens as well as Dürer, Poussin, and Rembrandt (Walker, “Degas,” 174).

¹² Eugène Delacroix, *Dictionnaire des beaux-arts* (Paris: Hermann, 1996), 40: “presque tous les grands maîtres.”

¹³ Delacroix, *Dictionnaire*, 177.

¹⁴ Reff has identified approximately 740 copies in the artist's oeuvre, including painted copies as well as drawings (Reff, “Further Thoughts on Degas's Copies,” 534).

practice was not just one of repetition. It united his affinity for drawing, different techniques, and art of the past, ultimately providing him too with an “immense savoir” of methods, subjects, and imagery. But as the art of Degas’s Academic contemporaries demonstrated, this education predisposed artists to recombine, reuse, and endlessly repeat past artists’ subjects and methods. Even as a copyist, however, Degas began to develop his own style through replication of an Old Master’s painting. His superior copies demonstrate the intellect predicated by the copy, needed to see and understand its entire development by viewing only its final state, and his creative mind, already manipulating the constructions the Old Masters presented to him.

Of his hundreds of copies, *Rape of the Sabines* (1861-62, Norton Simon Museum) after Poussin was one of the most renowned and last large-scale, finished copies Degas made.¹⁵ Poussin’s copy instructed Degas in the material and intellectual craftsmanship of painting, including draftsmanship, palette, and pictorial strategies used to provide audiences with a legible moment of theater. Degas’s achievement led some viewers, including the critic Moore, to claim that it was “as fine as the original,”¹⁶ as it preserves in exacting detail Poussin’s affinity for color and composition built upon the juxtaposition of chaotic motion and order. Poussin would have represented the zenith of traditional art, as his work established many of the conventions French painting followed to Degas’s day, fully embodied its narrative function for the viewer, and referenced the art that inspired the painter.

Sabines presents a suspended moment of chaos, carefully choreographed and arranged by Poussin. Each figure twists in unnatural, contorted movement. For example, the woman in the foreground at the left simultaneously pulls from her captor and reaches for the man who turns to

¹⁵ Rouart claims this was his last copy (Rouart, *Degas: in Search of His Technique*, 15); Reff and other sources state Degas continued to copy into the 1890s and have produced examples (including his copy of Mantegna’s *Victory of Reason over the Vices* from 1897). The vast majority of these later copies, however, did not adhere to the formal, finished Academic standard.

¹⁶ Moore, *Impressions and Opinions*, 321.

look towards her as he flees the scene towards the right. At the center of the scene, a man rides his horse, which gallops to our left, as he reaches to the right in an effort to pull a woman to his side. Even figures that appear inert, such as the two men behind Romulus at the left, have been suspended in motion, as they are caught in mid-step moving forward. This tension created by the representation of movement but fixedness of the painting establishes a dynamic composition for the beholder. Poussin also crafted complex relationships among the figures, as each interacts with at least one other; they reach for, pull from, run to, or submit to one another. The concentration of figures in motion and the pandemonium of the scene, however, are balanced by the artist's imposition of order through the arrangement of figures, linear perspective, and architecture. This complexity gives rise to a world clearly organized, invented, and ordered by the artist.

Poussin's deliberate manipulation of the scene also provided the beholder with a theatrical narrative. The artist choreographs the figures, who are suspended in frenetic motion but still maintain an overall symmetry and balance. This first effect of staging suggests Poussin crafted the painting to play to an audience. Despite the tumult, the viewer enjoys an omniscient perspective, with nearly complete visual access to the many figures in the scene. Furthermore, the gestures, emotion of each figure, and arrangement of the posing figures enable the viewer to construct a narrative. For example, it is easy to imagine that the woman carried away at the left only recently parted the man fleeing at the right, as his outward facing, reaching palm complements her own hand reaching out towards him. Lastly, the linear perspective, indicated by the curiously lined ground of the Campus Martius, creates an enclosed space for the scene. The architecture further underscores the staging initially implied by the clear choreography of the subjects, supplies references to actual ancient Roman architecture, and forces the figures to

remain in the foreground. Therefore, *Sabines* employs a kind of theatrical configuration, which also restricts the space of the scene. Poussin's composition uses this symmetrical and structured "scena tragica formula"¹⁷ for the architectural structures to further underscore the drama of the moment.¹⁸ These lessons surely weighed heavily on Degas, who learned these pictorial constructions through his own copy and later altered before implementing in his own original compositions.

Despite the praise the copy received and the exactitude with which the artist replicated Poussin's execution, Degas's version departed from Poussin's in a subtle but significant way: he effaced its staging quality by forcing the viewer to confront more closely the chaos of the scene. This modification appears first with the cropping of the lower edge of the painting, which causes the three main figures of the foreground nearly to step out of the constraints of the frame. This movement of figures outward is not accidental, as Degas pulls other figures forward towards the viewer and painting's surface. For example, the white horse and three figures at the center advance closer to the foreground in Degas's version. Critic Julius Meier-Graefe identified other changes, which occur "in the drawing" but still preserve "the rhythm of the swaying masses" that Poussin conceived in the original.¹⁹ Ultimately, Degas's changes to the Poussin force the viewer to confront the scene presented more directly, redefining through the elimination of the Poussin's distance the viewer's relationship as removed spectator.

¹⁷ Yona Pinson, "Un langage muet: métaphore et morale dans les éléments architecturaux et scénographiques de Nicolas Poussin," *Artibus et Historiae* Vol. 18, No. 36 (1997): 119.

¹⁸ The architecture of the Louvre's version also demonstrates Poussin's knowledge gained during his travels and study in Italy. As Pinson states in her article, the temple behind Romulus is a faithful and detailed reproduction of Palladio's drawings reconstructing the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus. Pinson also suggests that certain elements of the architecture were also reused in other compositions.

¹⁹ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Degas* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1923), 22-23.

Degas was able to make these slight modifications through his copying practice, which most likely occurred through direct observation of the work.²⁰ According to some accounts, Degas labored over his copy for six months and used preparatory sketches to help him complete the painting (although unnecessary if the copy is executed *in situ*, in front of the work itself).²¹ Degas's attention and determination to complete the copy therefore demonstrates a conscious attempt to assimilate all of Poussin's lessons at once. His fidelity to the posing of the figures and their forced, exaggerated expressions, also displays an attention to the visual devices Poussin used to convey the narrative of the scene to the viewer. The *Sabines'* lessons further extended to the arrest of motion and choreography of figures, which anticipated Degas's affinity for modern subjects in movement. *Rape of the Sabines* therefore embodies the culmination of traditional techniques and concepts of representation, which taught Degas the conventional approaches he later used in his own oeuvre, although to very different ends.

Techniques: draftsmanship, media, palette, execution, and repetition

Degas's close examination of Old Master art like Poussin's *Sabines* informed his own applications of drawing, media, execution, and compositional methods, including, above all, repetition. In addition to his copy of Poussin, Degas further supplemented his body of copies with art from ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, sculpture by Della Robbia and Michelangelo, in addition to art by the fifteenth century Florentines (the Louvre's most frequently studied works by artists in this period). This exposure to a wide range of art would have shown Degas the evolution of pictorial methods and typologies from their beginnings. For Degas, repetition first

²⁰ Sara Campbell, *Nineteenth-century art, Vol. 2, Degas in the Norton Simon Museum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 78 note 13.

²¹ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 22. Additionally, in Duranty's *Le peintre Louis Martin*, Degas is described sketching *Sabines* in the Louvre; Reff has identified at least one drawn study in the artist's notebooks (Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, Notebook 14A, p. 33).

of his predecessors' compositions, and then of their technical methods enabled his repetition to all aspects of his artistic practice, providing him with the skill-set needed to reuse conventional techniques and methods of representation to create original compositions.

First, drawing served as the most fundamental artistic craft, uniting all arts and approaches for representation; for this reason, drawing formed the foundation of his entire oeuvre. Never abandoning this initial skill set, Degas's dedication to drawing reflects his beginnings in Academic training and devotion to draftsmen like Ingres. From its genesis in 1655 up until the pedagogical reforms of 1863, the Académie taught only *dessin* to its students; the other arts, like painting and sculpture, were learned in the private atelier of a master.²² The premise for this specialized and singular instruction was based on the conviction that drawing, a fundamental skill for all artists, connected all arts, including painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the traditional environment of the Académie and École des Beaux-Arts, the ability to draw represented a technical skill for reproducing elements or figures as well as the element upon which all arts rested. Mastery of drawing, therefore, enabled mastery in other media.

Line enabled Degas not only to simplify Old Masters' art from intricate, contrived compositions to their most basic elements, but it also forced the artist to engage in intellectual exercise. It challenged Degas by giving an artistic means to see form, in both life and other art, and predicated the development of artistic vision. Valéry describes Degas at length as an artist shaped and distinguished by his intellectual capacity, whose eye operated with as much *volonté* and will as his hands did to create art. A way to see form, drawing for Degas did not simply

²² Nearly all of Degas's earliest copies were drawings, which further underscore his initial ties to formal education at the École des Beaux-Arts. Opportunities to draw the human figure from life outside the Academic classroom were rare; however, Rewald discusses how in the mid-nineteenth century some painters including Courbet, Manet, Pissarro, and Monet attended the "Académie Suisse," an establishment started by a model near the Pont Saint-Michel, to draw from a live model for a small fee (Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 43).

consist of “seeing the lines and tracing them.”²³ A “transformation” occurred as “visual tracing” (the eye’s tracing, or seeing form) became “manual tracing” (that is, the hand’s rendering of vision).²⁴ In order to create art, Degas had to force this process to occur through a commitment to the craft, repetition of the practice, and conformity of optical vision (seeing) to artistic vision (line). (Valéry was surely influenced by the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche’s treatise, *Propos de Peintre: de David à Degas*, examining artistic practices of the time.²⁵ As Blanche stated, “originality resides less in the *conception* than in the *execution*. The methods are *all* in painting.”²⁶) Artistic vision, conceptual development, and painting, spurred by draftsmanship, consequently evolved throughout his education from art and exercises from life.

Draftsmanship also enabled Degas to identify with the artists he most admired, aligning himself with the tradition he used to inform himself and his art. Drawing secured Degas’s positive reception by Ingres, whose influence weighed upon the artist throughout his career. Upon their introduction in 1855, Ingres instructed Degas to “make lines...many lines, either from memory or from nature.”²⁷ The importance of their encounter should not be underestimated: Degas spoke often of their introduction and never abandoned Ingres’s directives of establishing line as the foundation for his art.²⁸ Like Poussin, Ingres represented the paradigm

²³ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 60: “voir les lignes et les tracer.”

²⁴ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 61: “tracement visuel,” “tracement manuel.”

²⁵ Over the course of research for this thesis, I discovered that Emory University holds Paul Valéry’s copy of Blanche’s book, authored over a decade before Valéry wrote *Degas Danse Dessin*. Emory’s volume has a dedication in Blanche’s hand on the title page in ink pen, reading: “à mon ami Paul Valéry / J.E. Blanche.”

²⁶ Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Propos de Peintre: de David à Degas* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1919), 150: “l’originalité réside moins dans la *conception* que dans l’*exécution*. Les moyens sont *tout* dans la peinture.”

²⁷ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 56: “faites des lignes...beaucoup des lignes, soit d’après le souvenir, soit d’après nature.”

²⁸ Interestingly, Valéry notes an “assez importante” variation Degas once made in telling the same story: in the second retelling, Degas claimed that on the visit he carried with him a number of his own drawings. Looking through them, Ingres told him: “C’est bon! Jeune homme, jamais d’après la nature. Toujours d’après le souvenir et les gravures des maîtres” (Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 56). Indeed, this variation seems significant: Ingres’s dismissal of nature as a model in the second version contradicts his first statement. Nevertheless, both accounts emphasize drawing.

of the artist who achieved greatness through his use of traditional visual language and the accepted artistic methods, which began with drawing.²⁹

Observation of Old Masters' painterly techniques continued to deepen Degas's understanding the developed and used constructions for the craft. First through drawing, then by painting copies, Degas soon developed a mastery of the two media and could reproduce the execution of the art he studied. In doing so, he placed himself within the artistic lineage of the painters he most revered, including Poussin, Ingres, and Delacroix. His copy of Poussin's *Sabines* exemplifies his attention to details such as palette and even brushstroke. As researchers at the Norton Simon Museum of Art have noted, Degas achieved the copyist's paradigm with *Sabines*, as he copied not only Poussin's composition but also his brushwork, repeating the Old Master's execution. This detailed replication of Poussin's painted technique, like Degas's devotion to Ingres's championed draftsmanship, permitted Degas to identify with his artistic precedents and fostered his continued learning of their methods.

Above all other methods, compositional and figural repetition revealed the artificial means used by the artist to create a work of art. Degas surely realized that copying as a student embodied a basic form of repetition. But for artists developing their own original oeuvres, repetition in the form of self-citation and compositional variants further enabled an artist's growth. First, the copying practice enabled the sharing of techniques and imagery between Degas

²⁹ Recounting a conversation he had with the painter Jean-Louis Gérôme, Degas also claimed to Jeanniot the "three great draftsmen" of the century were "Ingres, Delacroix and Daumier." From these three artists, Degas observed the capacity and range of draftsmanship, the fundamental method underlying all others in art. These three artists also championed the interests that would occupy Degas for the rest of his career. Ingres never abandoned his Classical leanings, firmly grounded in conservative imagery and methods, such as drawing and line. Delacroix cultivated an affinity for color as well as his "purely classical" interests that enabled him to utilize the conventions and methods of representation that allowed a painting to "escape time." Daumier recognized conventions in art and society, using his own art to criticize modernity. Therefore, Degas most likely valued this group not only for their shared interest in this fundamental method but also their commitment to reusing established imagery and methods to create original art. See Georges Jeanniot, "Souvenirs de Degas," 171 and Yves Sjöberg, *Pour comprendre Delacroix* (Paris: Beauchesne et Fils, 1963), 212.

and his predecessors: his repetition of their methods and techniques further linked him to tradition. But Poussin and Ingres also introduced him to this second kind of repetition, of individual figures as well as full-scale compositions. Ingres defended this practice, which drew derision from his critics, stating that he took as his “example the great Poussin, who often repeated the same subjects.”³⁰ The artist further explained his reasoning:

The majority of these repeated works, whose subject I like, seemed worth the effort of repeating or retouching so that I could improve them.³¹

This practice, therefore, enabled Ingres to revisit works he found already pleasing and further master his subject. Notable examples of his implementation of this practice include his multiple versions of *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.³² This method of self-citation and repetition extended to individual figures as well; Ingres, as Degas would do throughout his career, repeated figures from ancient art and repeated others in multiple compositions. Moore identifies in his essay “Ingres and Corot” Classical inspiration for Ingres’s figures, stating that “many a drawing by Apelles must have been identical with that of ‘La Source.’”³³ Ingres also used the nude of *La Source* (1820-1856, Musée d’Orsay) for later compositional variations, including both versions of *Venus Anadyomene*.³⁴ Blanche recounts how his *Oedipus* frequently appears on Etruscan

³⁰ Henri Delaborde, *Ingres, sa vie, ses travaux, sa doctrine, d’après les notes manuscrites et les lettres du maître* (Paris: Plon, 1870), 108: “pour exemple le grand Poussin, qui a souvent répété les mêmes sujets.”

³¹ Delaborde, *Ingres*, 108: “La plupart de ces oeuvres [répétées], que j’aime par le sujet, m’ont paru valoir la peine que je les rendisse meilleures en les répétant ou en les retouchant.”

³² These variations are presently conserved in the Musée du Louvre (1808, acquired 1878) National Gallery, London (c. 1828), and Walters Art Museum (1864). Degas owned the painting now owned by the National Gallery and would have also been familiar with this particular working method from his close study and frequent visits to exhibitions of Ingres’s work (such as the Exposition Universelle in 1855 or in the artist’s studio in 1864).

³³ George Moore, *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1893), 71.

³⁴ Musée du Louvre (c. 1848), Musée Condé, Chantilly (1848).

vases, and like Moore, does not find this influence in the least peculiar. “Is it not,” he asks, “regardless [of its origins], a painting the most characteristic of a French master?”³⁵

Second, repetition enhanced the artist’s ability to produce many original works using a few components in new combinations. Degas would have known of Ingres’ figural repetition in many of his notable compositions, like the bather appearing in the *Valpinçon Bather* who also features prominently in *Le Bain turc* (1862, Musée du Louvre) as well as *La petite baigneuse (Intérieur de harem)*.³⁶ As a young artist, he venerated the *Valpinçon Bather* and discussed seeing *Le bain turc*, in which the figure reappears in the foreground at the center, in Ingres’s studio (he remarked having seen this “rounded variation of *Bain turc*” to Moreau-Nelaton in 1907).³⁷ This reuse of Classical models and repetition of figures developed by the artist independently showed Degas the potential of the implementation of these two kinds of repetition.

Study of Poussin’s oeuvre introduced Ingres to this practice, which Ingres began using upon adopting Poussin as his “master in art and philosophy.”³⁸ As Ingres knew, and as Degas would have known from his own study of Poussin, the *grand maître* repeated figural types or groups as well as compositions.³⁹ *Sabines*, the inspiration of Degas’s great copy, exemplifies this practice and represents a confluence of these repetitive working methods. In the 1630s, Poussin painted two variations of the scene, now conserved in the Metropolitan Museum and the Musée du Louvre. The Metropolitan’s *Abduction of the Sabine Women* (c. 1633) most likely predates the *Rape of the Sabines (Enlèvement des Sabines)* (1637-1638) in the Louvre. Both versions

³⁵ Blanche, *Propos de Peintre*, 152: “n’est-il pas cependant le tableau le plus caractéristique du maître français?”

³⁶ *Intérieur du Harem* (Musée du Louvre, 1828); another variation is *The Small Bather* (Phillips Collection, 1828).

³⁷ Moreau-Nelaton, “Souvenirs de Degas,” 270: “variante en rond du *Bain turc*.”

³⁸ Edward S. King, “Ingres as a Classicist,” *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* Vol. 5 (1942): 85.

³⁹ Other examples of repeated compositions include his two versions of the *Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem* (1625, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel), *Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem* (1638, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria); *Venus and Adonis* (1624-25, Kimbell Art Museum), *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1630, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen, France).

directly reference Poussin's own education and use of repetition. This practice of self-citation and reformulation of a composition clearly illustrated the artifice of painting, its compositional structure, and the capacity of art to be manipulated by its creator. As many scholars have identified, Poussin also likely repeated figures he had studied, such as Bernini's *Pluto and Persephone* for the prominent two figures in the lower left of both versions. (Degas would have recognized this figural group, as he likely saw the sculpture during trips to Italy and probably sketched a copy himself.⁴⁰) The artist also closely studied and repeated this grouping of figures in other works, as seen in his study for *Rape of the Sabines* as well as a drawing for *Hercules and Deianira*, both in the Massimi Collection in Windsor.⁴¹ This practice required an education and a mastery of visual vocabulary, which could be organized into components and reformulated to create new compositions.

Visual vocabulary

Once spurred by repetition, shared artistic imagery developed and began a long evolution of poses, figures, and *gestes*, as Degas's copies detail. His earliest work as a copyist of painting and sculpture reveals foremost his interest in the human figure and the body's capacity for expression, which art since Poussin's had simplified into poses and conventional *gestes* used to convey the emotion it represented. In addition to this preoccupation with the human form, Degas usually focused on such figural details when copying larger compositions: as Loyrette asserts, the artist "almost never reproduces the entire ensemble of the composition but rather an

⁴⁰ Degas appears to have copied this sculptural group: although Reff does not identify the drawing as such, I propose that the figures depicted in Nb. 11, p. 46 are Bernini's *Pluto and Persephone* or the related *Rape of the Sabines* by Giambologna (although the latter has another figure at the feet of the man grasping at the woman, which does not appear in Degas's sketch). The suggestion of a base—beginning just under the male figure's right bent knee—implies this copy was made after sculpture resting upon such a support.

⁴¹ "A study for *Rape of the Sabines*" (Drawing 37, Massimi Collection, Windsor); "Hercules and Deianira" (Drawing 27, Massimi Collection, Windsor). See Walter Friedlaender, "The Massimi Poussin Drawings at Windsor," *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 54, No. 312 (Mar. 1929).

anatomical detail.”⁴² From antiquity and the Old Masters, he gained an encyclopedic knowledge of figural types and *gestes*, used in art as emotional evocation or signifiers for actions.

Additionally, artistic methods like figural and compositional repetition contributed to the development of *gestes* as coded images, signifying in some cases specific emotion or import. In other words, repeated poses or positioning in certain contexts instilled in certain imagery related meaning. Ultimately Degas accepted this education, but constantly manipulated and repeated it in new combinations to produce his own art. This knowledge of the Old Masters’ visual language certainly gave Degas a unique artistic fluency, what Valéry later referred to as knowing to “*parler peinture*.”⁴³

Figures, methods, and *gestes* provided a visual vocabulary for Degas and grew from the convention of painting as a kind of theater for its audience. From studies of Old Masters’ art, Degas appropriated not just the traditional poses, gestures, and approaches to figural representation, but also the meaning tied to some of these visual cues. By the nineteenth century, however, two categories of visual imagery had emerged: the conventional and the original. In this first category fall *gestes* and figures that announced the content and subject of the work. Clasped hands, for example, could be borrowed to develop a figure and maintain the connotations of piety and devotion they recall for audiences familiar with this imagery, which appeared repeatedly throughout Old Masters’ art. These visual devices helped audiences to understand the moment presented; however, with the repetition and proliferation of certain gestures throughout Old Master painting, these cues lost a sense of true meaning and became hackneyed and conventional. In the latter category, the imagery and figures escaped conventionality (by the artists’ restraint to excessively repeat and reuse certain gestures) but still

⁴² Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 43: “il ne reproduit presque jamais l’ensemble de la composition mais un détail anatomique.”

⁴³ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 42.

carried a narrative function. Degas's fluency in the Old Masters, or his absorption of their visual vocabulary, can be seen in his attention to *gestes* as well as his direct citation of specific figures and poses.

In his series "Promenades au Louvre," art critic and writer Louis Edmond Duranty reflected on the art preserved in the galleries of the museum and marveled at the *gestes* in some examples of the painting conserved there, which could be classified in this second category. Not simply "movements" or "gestures," the *gestes* he described and identified as genuine are often movements or poses that appear unconsciously done by the figure, and therefore were carefully calculated by the artist. Duranty asserted that hands were perhaps the most expressive and capable of delivering a *geste*, citing examples from Dutch genre painting and portraits by Holbein. The critic found that hands possessed a dynamic quality, conveying "calm" as well as "vivacity;" "intelligence" but also "foolishness."⁴⁴ Those gestures not overly repeated maintained an imprecise, indefinite meaning, less artificial than those repeatedly used and reused by artists. This imprecision endowed these images with a vibrant, animate quality, escaping the structured, deadened, and contrived design of traditional convention. Meier-Graefe and German art historian Max Liebermann noted Degas's shared interest, which they termed "characterization of subject" and viewed as indicative of Degas's study of German genre scenes.⁴⁵ Indeed, they claimed that "Degas attached as much importance to the...German genre-painters" as he did to

⁴⁴ Edmond Duranty, "Promenades au Louvre: Remarques sur le geste dans quelques tableaux (Deuxième article)," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* Tome 15, No. 2 (Feb. 1877): 178: "du calme," "de la vivacité," "de l'intelligence," "de la sottise."

⁴⁵ Studies of hands from figures by Old Masters fill many pages in Degas's notebooks, including but not limited to the following: Nb. 4, pg. 15; Nb. 6, pg. 70; Nb. 7, pg. 2; Nb. 7, pg. 12; Nb. 7, pg. 15; Nb. 8, pg. 9. He also painted a study of hands for the *Bellelli Family* after already beginning the composition. Interestingly, some portraits from this period suggest Degas struggled with this particular part of the human form: look for instance at the hands (especially the right) of *Achille de Gas* (1856-1857, National Gallery of Art) and the barely finished folded hands of *Madame René de Gas* (1872, National Gallery of Art).

fellow French painters.⁴⁶ Degas would ultimately achieve the spontaneity of movement of the Dutch *gestes* but by using the conventional modes overused and repeated in the French painting Duranty criticized.

Furthermore, as Duranty continues in his second installment of the series, the *geste* is a fixed position of the figure within “a series of actions.”⁴⁷ First, a tension is created between the dynamism of the moment and the fixed nature of a painting. Those who excel in capturing the true *geste*, therefore, capture a spontaneous moment, despite the careful design static, artistic medium dictates. Therefore, as the conventional artist had done to depict tired, overused *gestes*, the excellent artist still had to employ contrived methods, but do so in unconventional ways. Second, the motion’s being part of a “series of actions” also enables the viewer to see a continuous action, even if only a moment of it is represented; this ultimately enables temporality and the construction of narrative to develop. Through this latter development, an audience could read a painting through connecting a series of *gestes*. With the ideal application of these visual devices, Duranty argued the painting would achieve “a special equilibrium, a sensitive balance even to the non-analytic beholder.”⁴⁸ Even if not overly theatrical and exaggerated, this Old Master device still invited the audience’s viewing and projection of narrative. Regardless of their sophistication or originality, the figure’s pose and gesture inherently possessed a capacity for the theater and narrative that blighted the French painterly tradition.

In other words, an excess of *geste* and its conventional applications led to theatricality in art. Duranty addresses this recurring problem in French painting explicitly, stating that “it’s

⁴⁶ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 30.

⁴⁷ Edmond Duranty, “Promenades au Louvre: Remarques sur le geste dans quelques tableaux (Deuxième article),” *Gazette des Beaux Arts* Tome 15, No. 2 (1877): 172: “une suite d’actions.”

⁴⁸ Duranty, “Promenades au Louvre (Deuxième article),” 30: “un équilibre special, bien sensible même pour le spectateur qui n’analyse pas.”

theater” to the extent that “it’s almost even comedy.”⁴⁹ In the last installment of “Promenades,” Duranty actually attacked Poussin’s *Sabines* for its contrived saturation of *gestes* and theatrical elements.⁵⁰ He criticized the convenience of combining certain movements that Poussin had “wrongly combined into a single action,” such as the man at the right simultaneously reaching backwards and fleeing from the scene.⁵¹ His protagonist in his novel *Le peintre Louis Martin* also despised this theater, claiming the work possessed a surplus of “banality...and ridiculous insignificances.”⁵² This criticism especially demonstrated the problem with French painting that steadily surfaced. As artists repeated and incessantly reformulated imagery, *gestes* lost meaning and became insignificant, referencing used emotions, repeated constructions, and tired compositional formulas. Duranty asserted that depicting one of these two *gestes* would have been less forced. Moderation of *geste* in painting occurred once the artist inserted enough cues to allow the viewer to grasp an understanding of interactions between figures but not so much that it becomes a spectacle. Degas would ultimately achieve this balance by neutralizing repeated imagery’s overuse with unconventional and modern compositional approaches.

Propelled by his own artistic preferences, Degas developed an acumen for visual imagery and traditional artistic techniques through his copies. Poussin’s *Sabines*, especially, provided Degas with a wealth of inspiration for one of his finest copies, which incorporated the Old Masters’ methods he used throughout his career, including line, palette, compositional planning, repetition, and visual vocabulary. Degas never ceased defending the formalism and tradition of

⁴⁹ Edmond Duranty, “Promenades au Louvre: Remarques sur le geste dans quelques tableaux (Troisième et dernier article),” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* Tome 15, No. 3 (1877): 284: “c’est du théâtre,” “c’est même presque la comédie.”

⁵⁰ Duranty also references this “oeuvre très-vantée” in his second installment as a point of comparison for his discussion of Dutch interior genre scenes (Duranty, “Promenades au Louvre (Troisième et dernier article),” 30).

⁵¹ Duranty, “Promenades au Louvre (Troisième et dernier article),” 281: “fondus à tort en un seul.”

⁵² Edmond Duranty, *Le Pays des arts* (Paris: Charpentier, 1881), 336: “banalité et...insignificances ridicules.”

this education, stating that all students aspiring to create art in modernity should “copy the masters and re-copy them” before attempting to paint anything from nature, even a subject as simple as a “radish.”⁵³ This commitment to education underscores not only the importance he held to repetition, but also the necessity of learning how to compose in order to produce art. The copy also provided Degas with the formulas needed to create his own original compositions, incorporating conventional methods for an unconventional, new subject: modernity. After nearly a decade of copying, Degas began to implement these ancient and Old Master approaches to develop his own original oeuvres.

Subverting artistic convention to create modern art

Once equipped with a formal education and mastery of his predecessors’ traditional constructions for art, Degas started to develop his own painting. His first original compositions consisted primarily of portraits of himself or his family; only towards the end of his copyist phase in 1858 did he begin to employ Old Masters’ methods to attempt historical painting. But this venture into the formal art world did not last past 1865. Instead of continuing to produce Academic painting, he turned to an experimentation with traditional and conventional images and methods. His modern painting such as *Interior* (1868-69) attempted to resist its traditional function as theater for its viewer (following the modernist trail set by Courbet and Manet) and spring from contemporary, modern life. Unlike these predecessors, however, Degas continued to work through the constant repetition and employment of traditional modes of representation.

Beginning in the 1860s, Degas began to experiment with Old Masters’ visual language through discreet adoptions of their *gestes* and more general appropriations of compositional structures. To accelerate his education in visual devices used by the Old Masters, Degas began to

⁵³ Ambroise Vollard, *Degas: an intimate portrait*, trans. Randolph Weaver (New York: Crown Publishers, 1937), 60.

produce perfunctory copies, not fully executed, but rather quick sketches with annotations noting the brushwork, palette, impasto, and methods of the Old Master work. Therefore, even without executing a copy of the work in its original medium, Degas was able to assimilate the techniques of the Old Masters into his oeuvre. His portrait of *Thérèse de Gas* (c. 1863, Musée d'Orsay) illustrates this unorthodox shortcut and his willingness to manipulate the compositional structure and imagery he adopted.

Thérèse de Gas stands in three-quarters profile, her head slightly turned to her left towards the viewer. Her left arm lies folded across her waist while her right arm disappears into her voluminous dress. The presence and prominence of *Thérèse's* attire, including her hat adorned with a magnificent pink ribbon, emphasize the visual accessibility and vulnerability of her face. Degas also underscores the figure through the dynamic (and inaccessible) space around and behind her: the green wall seems to push her forward, while the doorway, empty room, and window opening onto a landscape beyond establish depth. While it is a portrait of a modern woman, this painting undoubtedly resulted from Degas's continued study of the vocabulary and methods of the Old Masters.

Only a few years before, during a trip to Genoa, Degas visited the Palazzo Rosso and quickly sketched a copy of Anthony Van Dyck's *Paolina Adorno Brignole Sale* (1622-27, Palazzo Rosso).⁵⁴ In Van Dyck's portrait, *Paolina Adorno* looks down onto the viewer as she stands on a raised step. Her height, exaggerated by the painter, and elaborate outfit create an imposing presence of authority. Her intricately gold-embroidered dress gleams against the deep vermilion tones of the curtain, chair, and carpet in the background and distinguishes her from the spartan architectural space. She folds her right arm across her waist and holds a flower, which

⁵⁴ It should also be noted that Degas also copied Van Dyck's similar portrait *Margaret of Lorraine* in the Uffizi around this time (as reproduced in Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, Nb. 12, p. 62).

seems tentatively offered to the viewer. Degas's carefully annotated sketch (Notebook 13, p. 43) remarks on the colors of the prominent elements: the "red carpet," the dramatic "red curtain," as well as the "dark blue dress / with embroidery / in gold."⁵⁵ Significantly, his notes also reveal his attention to the effects created by the construction of the composition. Above the enframed sketch, Degas notes how Van Dyck produced the compelling portrait: "the head alone dominates."⁵⁶ As Degas duly observes, her face, framed by an elaborate collar, compels and engages the viewer. Van Dyck's portraits frequently used this pictorial strategy of the subject's gaze looking to its beholder as a means to initiate a relationship between viewer and painting. Degas's notes also indicate an attention to Van Dyck's perspective and imposed distance between the viewer and the subject. For example, his copy eliminates the step that separates the viewer from the Marchesa, but preserves Van Dyck's composition with the annotation, "there are more" (referring to the step).⁵⁷

Degas's study of the portrait facilitated his assimilation of Van Dyck's methods, which he implemented in the portrait of *Thérèse*. The similarities in composition are immediately evident in the pose, the orientation of the subject, the silhouette created by the dress, the emphasis on the face through the elaborate costume, and the conservative gestures of the body as with the demurely folded arm. Both use color as a means to draw the subject closer to the viewer and to mitigate the flatness to which the canvas is predisposed. Degas uses the complements of the sage green wall and pink bow, Van Dyck the gold and navy of the Marchesa's dress against the red curtain. Therefore, his study of Van Dyck's technique clearly enabled Degas's appropriation of the Old Master's figuration and reappeared in his original portraiture.

⁵⁵ As transcribed from the sketch by Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 80: "tapis rouge," "rideau rouge," "robe bleu foncé / avec broderie / d'or."

⁵⁶ As transcribed from the sketch by Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 80: "la tête seule domine."

⁵⁷ As transcribed from the sketch by Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 80: "il y a encore."

Additionally, the sketch and Degas's original also bear affinities. For instance, the Van Dyck's columns, reduced to a few straight vertical lines in Degas's copy, anticipate the vertical lines of the doorway, window frame, and walls of his portrait. The simplification of the Marchesa's dress to a voluminous triangle with a horizontal line distinguishing the embroidered hem from the blue skirt mirror the dress of Degas's portrait, which is formed from the skirt with an overlay.

Degas, however, began to manipulate and alter his predecessor's set relationship between sitter and viewer in the portrait of *Thérèse*. While Van Dyck's Marchesa extends multiple invitations to the viewer—the flower in hand (offered to or perhaps received from the viewer), the open chair, the short step that narrowly separates the Marchesa's and the viewer's spaces—Degas's subject confronts and his composition makes the intended relationship ambiguous. *Thérèse* appears to cross into the viewer's space, as her lower half disappears due to the cropping by the frame. Unlike Van Dyck's painting, the viewer has no void to fill if granted entry into the painting. No open chair awaits the viewer in Degas's portrait, only a glimpse of a shallow room behind *Thérèse*; aspects of the space beyond, like the window, can already be easily perceived from the perspective established by Degas. Signifiers and *gestes* qualifying the subject are also subdued. Degas makes a simple presentation of *Thérèse*, whose status is perhaps only identifiable through her dress and pose. Degas's appropriation of Van Dyck's figure and manner of constructing portraits, therefore, exceeded the simple aim of mastery of the Flemish artist's technique. Instead, it presents an example of his further experimentation with the methods he learned during his education, applying visual conventions such as portraiture's typical poses to contemporary subjects.

The problem with the repetition of convention in conventional ways

But Degas's repetition of Old Master methods and pictorial designs without significant alteration to their first-used function soon proved problematic. In an article for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, art historian John Walker surveyed the artist's works from this period heavily influenced by the imagery he copied. Walker identified Degas's frequent repetition and citation of specific figures, past art, and compositional structures as a symptom of the artist's struggle for originality. He asserted that Degas must have recognized the "limits of his inventive faculties," copying as extensively as he did to find figures and forms to borrow to achieve a composition "already made."⁵⁸ This claim and survey of Degas's study of the Old Masters, while denying the artist's creative capacity, astutely identified the artist's frequent variation and repetition of figures and themes from past art.

To a certain extent, one of Degas's first historical (and perhaps only political) paintings demonstrates Walker's claim. Contemporary with his copies of Poussin and other art preserved in the Louvre, *Alexander and Bucephalus* (1859-61, National Gallery of Art) announces Degas's sources of education and inspiration with the Italians' palette, Ingres's devotion to line, Delacroix's rise to form through color, figures inspired by Old Masters' models, and a knowledge of historical subjects and representation. In Degas's composition, Alexander and Bucephalus stand at the left, pushed closer to the foreground by the mountainous landscape in the far background and architectural structure immediately behind them. Alexander guides the horse's head with his right hand, as an attendant lifts up a cloak to wrap around Alexander's shoulders (or perhaps to keep the horse from seeing his shadow, the reason for the animal's wild

⁵⁸ John Walker, "Degas et les maîtres anciens," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* Tome 10, No. 6 (1933): 183: "limites de ses facultés inventives," "toute faite."

and unstable temperament).⁵⁹ The young conqueror obstructs our view of the horse and a red shot of fabric conspicuously hangs at the left, obscuring part of the subject's figure. It would also seem Alexander provides the light source for this work, as his brilliant white tunic and porcelain skin illuminate the scene immediately around him, whereas the figures on the right look on in shadow. A tree—whose trunk has been partially painted over during revisions by the artist—shelters four figures. The figure furthest from the viewer, with outstretched arms, survives in the composition only with his arms and torso. The figure in front of him turns in profile towards Alexander; another young boy leans in from behind (despite lacking legs upon which to stand) and a fourth draped figure, a crouching woman, turns to look at the scene, her profile indistinguishable. At the center of the painting, in the distance behind this scene, a viewer can distinguish horses secured and tied to an outdoor post.

In this historical composition, Degas employed equally historical, traditional methods—instead of manipulating them as he had in the portrait of *Thérèse* and his other portraits from the period. The influence of Italian painting appears in the rich ochres of the ground, the saturated blue of Alexander's cloak, and the verdure of the landscape in the background. The presence of draftsmanship and line emerge noticeably with Degas's treatment of the unfinished figures. A thick outline in black defines the contour of the crouching or seated figure's left arm in the lower right; the white tunic of the figure outstretching his arms definitively outlines the profile of the standing man. Several figures in the painting appear to have evolved from copies Degas had previously made. For example, the crouched figure derives much from Degas's studies of the

⁵⁹ Once he turned the horse's head to prevent him from seeing his shadow, Alexander tamed the horse, which became his famed steed throughout his campaigns in the Mediterranean. Alexander and Bucephalus are featured prominently in the *Battle of Issus*, preserved in Naples's Archeological Museum. It is likely that Degas had seen the work during his trips to Naples.

draped figure—a study for *Seramis* from the same period is nearly identical.⁶⁰ The man with arms outstretched also echoes other figures in full *geste* Degas would have seen in the Louvre or Musée du Luxembourg, as this same type of figure appears in David's *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799) and Ingres's *The Martyrdom of St. Symphorian*⁶¹ as well as his own studies for *Daughter of Jephtha* (c. 1859).⁶² In *Alexander and Bucephalus*, Degas cites these references with his composition and employs them in their conventional context to ultimately create a conventional, historical painting.

As this work was among the first original, historical ones Degas produced, the artist's noticeable reliance upon Old Master figuration and methods was probably intentional. For the artist beginning his career, using accepted and known imagery for a conservative subject would have provided a safe foray into the Academic art world and Salons. Furthermore, Degas's choice of representing Alexander the Great alludes to French historical paintings, in particular those of Charles Le Brun, who often represented King Louis XIV in this guise.⁶³ In addition to this subject evoking political portraiture, the painting appears to make an explicit reference to the French nation: the blue cloak, Alexander's white tunic, and hanging red tunic form together a reversed *tricolore*. This subtle expression of nationalism, combined with study of the Old masters, would have promised a secure reception into the structured, traditional art world.

A viewer of *Alexander and Bucephalus*, however, should immediately notice a problem with this argument. Degas never finished the painting, despite his many preparatory studies. In fact, he fully realized very few paintings of this genre and gave up historical painting altogether

⁶⁰ See Walker, "Degas," fig. 9.

⁶¹ Degas copied this work in 1855 (Lemoisne, Reff, and Brame, *Degas et son oeuvre [Supplement to catalogue raisonné]*, 1).

⁶² For studies showing this figure, see Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, Nb. 14, p. 25 and Nb. 15, p. 24.

⁶³ Significantly, Le Brun also studied with Poussin in Italy and became the first director of the Académie in 1663. Degas's citation of his painting would therefore suggest an attempt to further align himself with French painterly tradition.

soon after the completion and exhibition of *Les Malheurs de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (c. 1865) in the Salon of 1865.⁶⁴ Therefore, even when using the Old Masters to solve “pictorial problems,” as Reff dubbed them, Degas still could not find adequate originality if he repeated conventional methods in the conventional manner.⁶⁵ But Degas’s education surely did not constrain him. While his attempts at creating original works using traditional methods in their appropriate context failed—as *Alexander and Bucephalus* demonstrates—his formation both prepared and propelled him into a career for modernity. Degas revealed his anxiety about achieving art as significant as the Old Masters’. As he said to Moore in the early 1890s,

it is very difficult to be great as the old masters were great. In the great ages you were great or you did not exist at all, but in these days everything conspires to support the feeble.⁶⁶

“To be great as the old masters were great,” Degas would have had to continue using their traditional methods, imagery, and subjects to produce conventional compositions. Although his formation provided him with a thorough understanding of art’s various constructions, by the nineteenth century, artists had exhausted these combinations of the Old Masters’ methods and subjects. This statement, often ignored in the context of Degas’s career as a copyist and developing artist, is telling. While the Old Masters provided Degas with the visual language and formation necessary to become “great,” he soon realized achieving art and a career in the same manner as his predecessors had become impossible in his time. Instead he would need to produce a new framework in which to employ their methods. In contrast to his fidelity to these tired but universally-used approaches, the “feeble” to whom Degas referred in 1893 surely included the nebulous group beginning to form in this period, who sought to relinquish all ties to Old

⁶⁴ Roy McMullen, *The Life and Times of Edgar Degas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 125.

⁶⁵ Theodore Reff, “Further Thoughts on Degas’s Copies,” *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 113, No. 822 (Sept. 1971): 534.

⁶⁶ Moore, *Impressions and Opinions*, 314.

Masters' methods and traditional painterly craft—that is, the nascent Impressionist circle. Degas's approach maintained his ties to the Old Masters, but also granted independence from them, as he used them in unconventional ways while repeating them in depictions of modern subjects. As Degas had already demonstrated with his own artistic formation, artists began to seek more independence from the Académie and the French painterly tradition, which endorsed only certain subjects, and collectively effected many shifts in the art world, including Romanticism, the Realism pioneered by Courbet, and, on the horizon, Impressionism.

His copy of *Sabines* and his later historical works reveal that Degas was fluent in this “grammar of drawing and composition,” as Duranty called it, but he soon abandoned conventional, Academic painting.⁶⁷ Despite his shift from traditional, historical, and allegorical subjects to modern ones, Degas still employed his understanding of the workings of visual vocabulary and *gestes*; however, he did not continue to use this language as Academic convention dictated. To begin a career in painting modernity but not abandon his ties to tradition, Degas extracted and repeated Old Master visual language out of its affected, traditional context and formulated new compositions. His paintings from this period—between his prolific copyist phase in the 1850-1860s and the rise of Impressionism in the 1870s—served as exercises in composition and conventional modes of representation, in an effort to create original, unconventional, and modern art still linked to Old Masters through its “grammar” and visual devices. Valéry famously referred to his art as the result of “a series of operations”⁶⁸: by manipulating and repeating combinations of common approaches and frequently used subjects, Degas created art descending from Old Master tradition while embracing modernity.

⁶⁷ Duranty, *Le Pays des arts*, 336: “grammaire du dessin et de la composition.”

⁶⁸ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 10: “une série d’opérations.”

A new formula: traditional imagery + radical compositional design = *Interior*'s "mystery"

In many respects, *Interior* (1868-69, Philadelphia Museum of Art) represents this new extensive artistic experimentation and repetition of traditional visual constructions, which characterized the rest of Degas's post-copyist work. By resisting obvious combinations of *geste* and subjects inviting the viewer's reading and projections of narrative (a kind of theatricality), Degas began to paint innovative compositions that contained high degrees of visual ambiguity and illegible modes of narrative. In other words, his art actively resisted its natural role as an object for an audience's reading, and did so through the use of its conventional visual language and genre. Degas admired illegibility, or "mystery" in a painting, as a capacity of art. As Lemoisne remembered, Degas stated that

a painting demands a certain mystery, some vagueness, some fantasy. When one always dots all his *i*'s, one becomes a bore. Even after nature one must compose.⁶⁹

For Degas, painting predicated invention and active composing. Without a design, "mystery" could not be achieved and would fail to compel its audience by representing a subject that could be immediately understood. Invention and manipulation of painterly constructions could give a painting its dynamism through producing "vagueness," even if the artist worked from nature.

Degas's interest in ambiguity explains in part his early compositions from this period, including *The Bellelli Family* (1858-1867), *Bouderie (Sulking)* (c. 1870), and *Interior* (1868-69). Julius Meier-Graefe's commentary of the *Bellelli Family*, executed a few years before, resonates too for *Interior* and the artist's developing modernism:

There is so much art in this picture, and yet it is impossible to get into close touch with it. You do not know why it was painted; you ask what these people, who are presented with the utmost skill, really signify. You search for the genre, you attempt to discover some hidden tragedy or comedy, you find nothing and are none happier for it. Taking away the story from a picture which calls for literary interpretation is not enough to make it into a

⁶⁹ Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 86: "une peinture demande un certain mystère, du vague, de la fantaisie. Quand on met tout le temps les points sur les *i*, on finit par ennuyer. Même d'après nature il faut composer."

work of art. It is not sufficient to paint an interior and human figures with great skill. A higher and pictorial purpose must appear, convincing as a legend, even though it is impossible to formulate it as precisely as a legend may be put into words.⁷⁰

Therefore, Degas succeeded in developing a new kind of modern art through compositions of familiar imagery that ultimately could not cohere into a legible image and could resist the viewer. This subversion of a painting's conventional method of operation, making shared, understood, and traditional visual language with a modern subject illegible, continued to demonstrate Degas's experimentation with the repetition of art's conventions as a the means to achieve the modern.

Perhaps the most contested and debated work in his oeuvre, *Interior* exemplifies the question of a painting's legibility. Qualifications such as "fragmentary, provisional, and ambiguous" apply most readily to the painting,⁷¹ which many scholars have interpreted as inspired by Realist literature by Duranty, Zola, and others.⁷² The debate over the painting's relationship to literature is matched only by the controversy surrounding the proposed titles of the painting, including *Interior*, *The Dispute*, and, the most inflammatory, *The Rape (Le viol)*. Although multiple sources recall Degas referring to the tableau as his "tableau de genre,"⁷³ the alternative title of *Le viol* stuck to the work, which depicts anything but such a definitive event. What the controversy over *Interior* does definitively demonstrate is that audiences overwhelmingly share the frustration in the inability to *read* the painting and establish a narrative.

⁷⁰ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 27.

⁷¹ Susan Sidlauskas, "Resisting narrative: the problem of Degas's *Interior*," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 75, No. 4 (Dec. 1993): 671.

⁷² Critic Georges Rivière suggested Duranty's novel *The Struggle of Françoise Duquesnoy* as a source; later, Zola's *Madeleine Féral* or *Thérèse Raquin* as well as Edmond de Goncourt's *The Prostitute Elisa* was named another possible inspiration for the composition (Reff, *The Artist's Mind*, 204).

⁷³ Degas as cited by Henri Rouart; Degas's friend Paul Poujaud also remembered this title (Reff, *The Artist's Mind*, 202).

Interior depicts a man and a woman in a bedroom; however, despite the intimacy of the space they occupy, Degas offers no understanding of the nature of their relationship. A lamp (and, it would seem, the open sewing box) illuminates the space. The woman sits at the left, her back turned to her companion, her face cast in darkness. She pulls away from both her counterpart and the viewer. Meanwhile, the man leaning on the door at the right observes, his presence heightened by the dark shadow cast behind him. A discarded white garment, probably a corset, lies on the floor between the bed and the table. Draped over the bed frame hangs a man's coat. The tension of not knowing or frustration of not understanding this scene is heightened by the space, whose ceiling seems to compress downward while the floor, highlighted by the striped rug, simultaneously tilts upward. The rug, bed, and table further emphasize the void between the couple. All of these elements ultimately do not cohere into a readable composition.

Using Degas's artistic formation as a lens, the visual, historical ties of *Interior* to painting Degas copied and studied begin to surface. For example, the seated woman at the left could originate from several sources, ranging from art Degas recorded in his notebooks to figures developed by Ingres. In one of his earliest sketchbooks, Degas copied a similar draped, seated female figure, whose tunic slips off her right shoulder, from the *Musical Concert* in the Naples Museum (Notebook 7, p. 18).⁷⁴ Another compelling example appears in his study of *Niké attachant sa sandale* (1854-56, Private collection), which he copied in the mid 1850s and kept in his studio throughout his life.⁷⁵ Like both figures in *Interior* and *Musical Concert*, the Nike's tunic slips from her shoulder as she leans to the side and downward to fix her sandal. Also in this Classical vein, Degas's figure alludes to Ingres's *The Odyssey*, who appears in *The Apotheosis of*

⁷⁴ Reff makes this identification in his catalogue of Degas's notebooks (Reff, *The Notebooks*, Nb. 7, p. 18); this figure, however, is also similar to a sculpture of *Agrippina the Younger* in Museo Nazionale, Naples.

⁷⁵ This drawn copy only recently surfaced at a Christie's auction (Paris 2 December 2008, Sale 5535, Lot 2).

Homer (1826-27, Musée du Louvre).⁷⁶ Both Degas's and Ingres's sitters turn in profile, leaning forward and turning away from the viewer in self-absorption. This latter figure, treated by Ingres individually in numerous studies and included in *The Apotheosis of Homer*, was an especially familiar one for Degas, who viewed the final composition at the Exposition Universelle in 1855,⁷⁷ copied figures from it, and later owned a painted study as well as a graphite and white chalk study of the figure's drapery.⁷⁸ Therefore, Degas was not only keenly aware of this figure, he would also have understood the attached meaning and signifiers this figure carried, providing him with an ideal component for his genre scene formula.⁷⁹ The figure (1868-69, The Morgan Library and Museum) bearing ties to the ancient as well as more recent precedents suggest it evolved as a result of Degas's study and education, although it cannot be definitively tied to any of these examples.

While the male figure appears to stem less from painterly tradition and more from modernity, Degas continued to operate under the influence of Old Master techniques. He executed numerous drawn and painted studies for this figure, individually and sometimes accompanied by another female figure. *Man in a bowler hat* is one example of these studies (c. 1870, The Morgan Library and Museum). Degas also repeated this figure in another contemporary work, the double portrait *Two Men* (1865-69, Metropolitan Museum of Art). In all of the studies and this possible variation, the pose remains constant: the lean against a wall or

⁷⁶ This particular painting by Ingres was surely a favorite of Degas, who owned fifteen drawings and six painted studies of the work later in his life. He posed a photographic parody of the composition while on vacation in 1885.

⁷⁷ Andrew Shelton, *Ingres and His Critics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 219. Additionally, Ingres passed away the year before Degas began *Interior* (in 1867); in honor of the late master, the École des Beaux-Arts hosted a retrospective of his work. Degas undoubtedly attended the exhibition, and this imagery would have been fresh in his mind (Bruno Gaudichon, *Degas Sculpteur*, 241).

⁷⁸ Degas owned Ingres's *The Odyssey, Study for "The Apotheosis of Homer"* now in the Hyde Collection, Glenn Falls, New York and *Seated Woman, Study for the Odyssey in "The Apotheosis of Homer"* now in the Musée du Louvre (Collection Sale I, 67 and 189, respectively).

⁷⁹ The crouching figure in *Alexander and Bucephalus* is also in a pose similar to that of this figure in *Interior*.

door behind, his left arm folded behind him while the right hand rests in his pocket. His expression inscrutable, his stance could connote either his ease and dominance or a hesitation to venture across the room. His pose and orientation to the viewer too recalls Degas's studies of portraiture. For example, as in Van Dyck's portrait previously discussed, the subject typically appears from this angle of three quarters profile.

Furthermore, if we attempt a reading of this "genre painting" as Duranty does of the figures in Dutch genre scenes in the Louvre, what do we glean? As the critics' debate shows, not much. First, the *gestes* aiding narrative that Duranty reads—usually communicated through hands—have been eliminated entirely in favor of general pose. (This simplification and generalization of *geste* may be interpreted as another attempt to foil narrative: as Duranty commented in his observations, *geste* is a part of an action. With a *geste*, a viewer could anticipate the arc of the overall motion, establishing a sense of temporality—conducive to the creation of a narrative.) The woman's head looking downward to the floor and her back to her companion connote contemplation, withdrawal, and/or reflection on the left; the man's shadowed presence and distance from the woman suggest either dominance or fear of crossing the void at the right. The visual language Degas employs cannot be read definitively or used to construe a narrative, despite his employment and adoption of a conventional subject—an interior or "genre" scene as he called it—and Old Master figuration. Since the figures individually resist reading, the composition as a whole loses legibility and resists its audience.

Similarly, the actual interior they occupy also presents an amalgam of disconnected contemporary visual signifiers for masculinity and femininity, as scholar Susan Sidlauskas has analyzed. For example, she cites that the map behind the woman on the back wall codes or "genders" the left side of the room male, while the bed and pictures hanging above it on the right

seem “more feminine.”⁸⁰ The interior also fails to establish a definite location: are they in a domestic, private setting or a public space? Sidlauskas asserts the “domestic fixture” of the sewing box would suggest the first, while the “impersonal décor” of the interior could also suggest the latter.⁸¹ The interior, as well as the relationship between the figures, therefore, is composed of readable cues that ultimately fail to coalesce into a legible reading for the viewer to understand what is represented.

If Degas wished to avoid the theatrical qualities he observed in Old Masters’ art like Poussin’s *Sabines*, saturated with legible or narrative visual cues, but still reuse the methods he learned in his formation, *Interior* presents a compelling case. Unfortunately, if a resistance to narrative and negation of theater was Degas’s goal, three main issues arise with *Interior*. First, the composition’s subject and figures inherently invite viewers to construct a narrative to describe what they are seeing (although at the same time it makes this reading impossible). Second, despite Degas’s unwillingness to offer an explanation of the scene, demonstrating a desire to establish “mystery” and resist a set of painterly, narrative conventions, the painting (by virtue of being a painting) inherently maintains to a certain extent theater, as an audience views it and readily supplies their interpretations of the moment represented. Third, this attempt, to make art visually referencing conventional viewing a “genre” subject, but that does not allow this conventional narrative to form, fails its unwanted audience; it only succeeds in achieving dynamism through its theatrical artifice and contrived ambiguity that enables it to resist the beholder.

The *Interior*’s presentation of a man and a woman in an intimate space extends an invitation to the viewer to interpret a narrative or scene; however, Degas’s construction of the

⁸⁰ Sidlauskas, “Resisting narrative,” 674.

⁸¹ Sidlauskas, “Resisting narrative,” 674.

space and his figures' poses do not deliver a legible, readable image. While early critics and viewers attempted to construct a narrative to explain the tension of the scene, the continuing debate over the painting's content and origins confirm that a definite narrative is impossible. Degas's own title of "genre painting" evokes images of readable moments of daily life, like the Dutch paintings Duranty described in the Louvre. But to make a *modern* genre painting (one that resists such a reading but still uses traditional methods), Degas had to actively design the composition to negate and to prevent a narrative, natural to the genre, from forming. While Duranty discussed reading art in "Promenades au Louvre" and the artist studied *geste* and frequently used figural poses through his meticulous copies, Degas appeared to have worked to achieve the opposite and modernity: denying the viewer that legibility. This refusal, which prevents the establishment of narrative or understanding of the scene, enables as much as it refuses.

First, by limiting narrative, Degas created art that could not be readily consumed by the viewer. Moore wrote how Degas wished "to pass through the world unobserved by those who cannot understand him—that is, by the crowd," who lacked his privileged education and willingness to accept the new modes of modernist realism.⁸² By creating art that resists narrative or readability, Degas ensured, on a certain level, that only those who possessed a similar set of interests could be persuaded to admire his work. To fully understand *Interior*, it is perhaps best for viewers to resist their conventional role of readers of the painting as much as Degas resisted conventional modes of literary realism which translate the world into non-painterly codes. Therefore, Degas also predicated a new kind of relationship to develop between his art and its viewer by refusing the viewer a legible image. While he asserted its artificiality (it is not natural or visible in reality) and his manipulation and control over the viewer through the contrived

⁸² Moore, *Impressions and Opinions*, 307.

compositional structure, he forced his art to maintain vitality through the tension of the image presented for visual consumption, but one that ultimately cannot be directly consumed. In other words, his presentation immediately establishes a kind of familiarity with the subject, but ultimately renders the image as a potential linguistic entity unfamiliar and “mysterious.”

Still, a viewer will be tempted to find the story or read a relationship between the figures that does not exist, as the general consensus among scholars and the painting itself fails to proffer. This natural approach by a viewer, however, is in itself a kind of theater, even if Degas’s painting actively resists it. A work of art will always have an audience. The first beholder is the artist and all others are secondary audiences. To a certain extent, painting will therefore always be a theater or forum for the subject the artist represents and be viewed by others who try to analyze and understand the scene placed before them. If Degas was experimenting with the conventions of imagery he studied as a copyist to develop a new kind of art that was at once both modern and traditional, his art was still a kind of theater by treating a subject that invites the audience to project (and expect to read) narrative upon it.

While Degas avoided the theatricality Duranty despised in Poussin’s *Sabines*, *Interior* achieves its dynamism through the expectation of theater and Degas’s denying it. The frustration of expectation of narrative with the presentation of a familiar moment, but Degas’s denial of it, endows *Interior* with its mystifying quality. The viewer continues to try construing a narrative, which cannot be done; it is through Degas’s withholding narrative and the artifice of the painting—its contrived composition, exploitation of pose, scenic staging—that it remains compelling. For Degas, it was a successful experiment in creating mystery but failed because the extremity of its quasi-literary artifice gave rise to the intrigue the painting possesses. Ironically, Degas’s working method to eliminate visual legibility for the audience is itself a kind of theater.

His extensive studies for the space without the figures, which were treated individually in studies, constitute a kind of rehearsal for the final composition. His fusion of these elements completes the staging of the composition, not unlike Old Masters' works such as Poussin's *Sabines* had before him. As Meier-Graefe noted, "Degas made pictures just as a producer makes a stage setting."⁸³

Ultimately, the mystery of the painting is propelled by the void its artifice creates: the viewer cannot know what is happening, no matter how closely we observe and contemplate. The painting is static, unchanging—its mystery does not fade. Degas's compositional construction, built from Old Masters' visual language and manipulated to achieve visual ambiguity or illegibility, disables narrative although it references and employs familiar figures, poses, and constructions inviting narrative. *Interior* was among Degas's first attempts to create a modern work resisting its audience in an effort to eliminate the theater present in Old Masters' compositions. Degas's *Interior* does succeed in continuing to compel audiences to contemplate, but it fails to escape theatricality entirely. It retained this convention through its inherent composition and its being as a painting—it is still theater but one that continues to leave the audience in the dark.

By the time of Degas's transition to modernity as his subject, his peers had noticed Degas's self-education and experimentation with its methods and visual language. Written in the 1860s and published in 1872, Duranty's novella *Le Peintre Louis Martin* affirmed the writer's opinion of Degas's intellect and unique approach to painting. The struggling painter Louis Martin goes to the Louvre to copy Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines* and finds there none other than

⁸³ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 30.

Degas, already working and “plugging away on the Poussin,” whose fervor inspires Martin to attempt his own copy.⁸⁴ The narrator digresses at this point with a description of Degas as an

artist of a rare intelligence, preoccupied by *ideas*, which seemed strange to the majority of his fellows; and benefiting from having neither methods nor transitions in his active brain, which was always boiling away, they called him the inventor of social chiaroscuro.⁸⁵

Duranty undoubtedly recognized Degas’s difference from contemporaries including Manet and Fantin-Latour, who also make cameos in the novella. Contrary to his “fellows” who did not understand his intellectual painting, Degas possessed that “rare intelligence,” one informed by “*ideas*” gained through knowledge of art and the methods of past artists. This savoir also attributed to Degas’s “concern for research” and constant exploration of artistic methods, which surely motivated his exemplary self-education in the arts.⁸⁶ The artist’s intelligence also gave rise to his art, an intellectual exercise, commanding education and creativity, especially to venture outside Academically-ordained subjects. Degas applied this knowledge to his own art in unconventional ways, creating compositions with subjects presented as familiar or traditional but ultimately resisted an audience’s conventional reading.

⁸⁴ Duranty, *Le Pays des arts*, 335: “s’écimant aussi sur le Poussin.”

⁸⁵ Duranty, *Le Pays des arts*, 335-336: “artiste d’une rare intelligence, préoccupé d’*idées*, ce qui semblait étrange à la plupart de ses confrères; aussi, profitant de ce qu’il n’y avait pas de méthode ni de transitions dans son cerveau actif, toujours en ébullition, l’appelait-on l’inventeur du clair-obscur social.”

⁸⁶ Paul-André Lemoisne, “Les carnets de Degas au Cabinet des estampes,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 3 (April 1921): 219: “souci de recherche.” Lemoisne also recognized Degas’s intellect and surely borrowed Duranty’s words when he spoke of the “ébullition latente du cerveau” of the artist (Lemoisne, “Les carnets,” 219).

Chapter II. *La Nouvelle Peinture*, Degas, and the Repetition of Artifice

“*À vous il faut la vie naturelle, à moi la vie factice.*” – Edgar Degas

As *Interior* demonstrated, Degas’s interest in reiterating Old Masters’ developed imagery and methods—but in modern ways—prompted his shift from historical subjects to modern ones. But beginning in the 1870s, Degas began to focus almost exclusively on a few subjects, primarily dancers. Most scholars attribute his decision to abandon ambitions of history painting and to adopt dancers, as well as laundresses, jockeys, and bathers, to a newfound interest in modernity; but there are problems with this reasoning. First, as *Interior* demonstrated, Degas could create art depicting modernity without resorting to a themed subject.⁸⁷ Second, an “interest” in modern life does not account for Degas’s obsessive and prolifically repetitive treatment of these subjects. Indeed, from the 1870s until the end of his career, Degas would treat almost exclusively dancers and bathers (and in many cases, these subjects are nearly one and the same, as Degas reused dancers’ figures for bathers). Third, Degas’s close peers also shared this interest in the contingent, the modern; but Degas remained committed to mainly one subject—dance—and eschewed the landscape adored by his Impressionist contemporaries.

This chapter will provide a new understanding of Degas’s complex aesthetic choices. His post-1870 works demonstrate a constant subversion of the theatrical qualities of traditional approaches in conjunction with modern subjects, which, despite being immediately familiar to an audience, maintain the mystery Degas developed in *Interior*. Degas’s artistic formation, informed first by repetition of Old Masters’ methods and then by the art of his modernist contemporaries, instilled in Degas an overwhelming commitment to tradition. With dancers as

⁸⁷ Degas was familiar with ballet and individual dancers by the late 1860s, however, he did not start painting dance until abandoning history painting and his own modern version of genre scenes such as *Interior*.

his primary subject, Degas could continue to explore the artifice embodied in both arts, create modern art, and resist the emerging Impressionist ideals.

Dance's artifice, a parallel to French painterly tradition

Above all other subjects, dance provided Degas with an outlet to repeat and reformulate the conventional imagery of French painting. Its inherent theater provided an opportunity to expose the arts' dependence upon conventions, like the techniques the Old Masters employed in painting, such as *geste* and overtly staged compositional construction. The validity of this argument emerges from the general lack of consensus among scholars of his work. Most of the literature examining Degas attributes his interest in modernity and frequent visits to the opera to his decision to begin depicting dancers; however, this reasoning is not entirely satisfactory. Lemoisne asserts Degas became attached to the subject as it afforded a "game of muscles operating" and the challenge "of capturing a leap."⁸⁸ Therefore, for Lemoisne, the difficulty posed by rendering movement held Degas's interest. But other contemporary subjects surely could also have provided such an exercise. Ronald Pickvance suggests Degas's "deeply musical family" and interest in "ruthlessly exploring the human figure" as explanations for his adoption of the subject.⁸⁹ While Pickvance's second point seems likely, it does not explain why dance in particular (as opposed to other popular subjects, such as passerby on the street) proved the best option for Degas's observation. Among the more compelling arguments, Armstrong suggests Degas's interest in history painting transformed into "a preoccupation with its theatrical

⁸⁸ Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 83: "le jeu des muscles entraînés,...la ligne caractéristique d'un mouvement,...la difficulté d'être saisi au vol."

⁸⁹ Ronald Pickvance, *Degas 1879* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1979), 17-18. As Pickvance observes, Degas began to depict dancers in the late 1860s but in secularized settings rather than theatrical or dance-related ones (such as his portrait of Josephine Gaujelin, an actress and dancer). In the early 1870s, he began to depict dancers dancing on stage or in rehearsal. It was not until the end of the decade and 1880s that Degas began his almost exclusive treatment of dancers.

equivalent: operatic fiction and operatic *intermèdes*.”⁹⁰ This explanation, however, does not account for Degas’s abandonment of narrative, which characterizes *la peinture d’histoire*; his ballet pictures, like *Interior*, resist this theatricality of its historical “equivalent.” Overall, with the exception of Armstrong, the explanations presented fail to recognize the impact of Degas’s education and formation upon this decision. Addressing this disparity, Degas himself provides one of the best, although cryptic, reasons. The parallels between ballet and Degas’s painterly practice, however, bring other reasons to the surface. Briefly, these include: the subject’s clear origins in the modern day; the inherent emphasis and experience of viewing the figure, the predominant interest of Old Masters painting; the influence of his peers, namely Adolf von Menzel; and most importantly, the artifice dance and art share.

Significantly, Degas provided his own reason for concentrating on ballet. When asked by Louisine Havemeyer and Mary Cassatt why he always painted scenes of the ballet, he replied, “because only there can I rediscover the movements of the Greeks.”⁹¹ This explicit reference to past art affirms his interest in and reflection of the Classical and his education in traditional methods while treating subjects of his day. Others who knew Degas also realized his propensity to reference past art within an explicitly modern *oeuvre*. Novelist Edmond de Goncourt found Degas to

comment from time to time and mime a series of choreography, imitating in the language of the dancers one of their arabesques—it was very amusing to see, his arms held up in a circle, mixing the aesthetics of the dance master with the aesthetics of the painter, and speaking of the soft-brown of Velasquez and the outlines of Mantegna... Up until now, he is the man who has best captured, his copy of modern life, the soul of this life.⁹²

⁹⁰ Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out, Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 120.

⁹¹ René Gimpel, *Journal d’un collectionneur, marchand de tableaux* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1963), 186: “parce que là seulement je puis retrouver les mouvements des Grecs.”

⁹² Goncourt as cited by Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 90: “Le peintre vous exhibe ses tableaux, commentant de temps en temps son explication par la mimique d’un développement choréographique, par l’imitation, en langage de danseuse, d’une de leurs arabesques—et c’est vraiment très amusant de le voir, les bras arrondis,

Degas's use of "the language of the dancers," as Goncourt called it, in addition to his "mixing aesthetics," suggests his continued appropriation of art's visual language and turning to dance as a confluence of tradition and modernity. Goncourt's declaration that Degas achieved "the copy of modern life" also implies the artist's repetition in methods and in subjects. In both instances, Degas's interest in dance stems from its capacity to translate to his studies of past art, whether antique sculpture or painting by Old Masters.

In Degas's time, dance was a ubiquitous form of modern entertainment for those of his background, but was also another art form struggling to maintain its place in modernity. While the *abonnés* (typically bourgeois subscribers) of Paris frequented the opera, ballet was another art, like painting, that had lost its "inspiration" and prominence in the modern day, due to its "laws and conventions" and the retirement of its stars.⁹³ (Jules Perrot, for example, frequently featured in Degas's pictures of dance rehearsals, had retired by 1880.⁹⁴) For Degas, whose repetition of Old Master imagery and methods kept his art aligned with the tradition he admired and who admonished his contemporaries' abandonment of these painterly techniques, a modern subject that paralleled the changing art world would have provided an attractive source for his practice.

Like painting, ballet exists through the arrangement and presentation of the figure in an artistic setting. To view ballet is to view designed form, capable of communicating a narrative to an audience through visual cues in a theatrical milieu. In this sense, ballet would have served Degas just as the Old Masters had. Already a theme grounded in modern life, it also provided

mêler à l'esthétique du maître de danse l'esthétique du peintre, parlant du boueux tender de Velasquez et du silhouette de Mantegna...C'est jusqu'à présent l'homme que j'ai vu le mieux attraper, dans la copie de la vie moderne, l'âme de cette vie."

⁹³ Lillian Browse, *Degas Dancers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), 46.

⁹⁴ Ivor Forbes Guest, *Jules Perrot: master of the romantic ballet* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1984), 225.

another inherently theatrical subject, which he could make modern through resistance to conventional modes of narration. Paradoxically, Degas demonstrated through his compositions that the familiarity and accessibility of the subject (while stemming from actual theater) could be reanimated through contrived compositional design, such as visual cropping and questionable accuracy of the execution of figures. Also like Old Master painting, ballet represented an art formed by its conventions. Just as Old Masters like Poussin relied upon compositional structures to frame the moment represented or distinguish the importance of figures through their pose or placement, ballet operated with similar deference and dependence upon convention in terms of education and choreography. While reliant upon this tradition, ballet provided the distinctly modern element that eluded him in applying his Old Masters' education to historical and mythological subjects.

In his monograph, Meier-Graefe proposes Degas may have also turned to theater and dance as a subject as a result of his admiration of the work by German painter Adolf von Menzel.⁹⁵ It should be noted, however, that while Degas may have “never missed the opportunity of going to see pictures by this German painter,” it is more likely Degas began to study his work after adopting the subject of dancers in the early 1870s. Adolf von Menzel's work appears to have been exhibited in the 1880s, including an 1885 exhibition in the Tuileries, *after* Degas took up theater and ballet as his primary subject.⁹⁶ Still, Menzel was “not unknown to Paris” according to Meier-Graefe and shared with Degas a priority for the figure and reversal of conventional pictorial strategies. A significant point of comparison appears between Degas's early pictures of the theater and Menzel's *Théâtre du Gymnase à Paris* (1856, Alte

⁹⁵ Degas was familiar with Menzel, once claiming to a friend that he had been “influenced considerably” by his art. The French painter also made a copy of Menzel's *The Dinner Ball* in 1879 (Musée d'Orsay). See Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 48.

⁹⁶ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 48.

Nationalgalerie). The angled view of the stage with the orchestra below (and from the perspective of the balconies located next to stage right) as well as certain figures bears compelling parallels with Degas's own work. For example, the woman with opera glasses at the center of Menzel's composition is comparable to Degas's *Woman with opera glasses* (1875-76, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden): both women look at the viewer with opera glasses, shielding their faces from the viewer's gaze and enabling *their* study of the viewer. This figure destroys the illusion of the beholder occupying a removed position from the painting, as the painting confronts the audience and resists being passively viewed. Meier-Graefe noted this shared interest in visual devices, claiming "Menzel and Degas were closely related in the manner in which they regarded the subject, the delight they took in complicating visual objects."⁹⁷ While Menzel's art accounts only for Degas's few and early depictions of theater (not his obsession with dancers), Degas may have indeed been indebted to Menzel for his piqued interest in theater as a subject.

Finally, the most compelling argument for Degas's adoption of this primary subject lies in dance in the theater as thematizing the artifice of painting and the scenes of rehearsal thematizing the labor of art's creation. In other words, Degas's earliest paintings of dancers on the stage depict the illusion, spectacle, and construction of the art, which, I would suggest, paralleled in Degas's mind the act of painting itself. Similarly, his later depictions of dancers rehearsing—or more accurately in Degas's oeuvre, dancers resting, not actively rehearsing—convey the working method of each art as well as the labor involved in the realization of it. Indeed, François Mathey recognized that Degas's "art, daring and unusual, conveyed movement, it had a theatrical quality, and through it he was able to identify himself with his subjects."⁹⁸ This

⁹⁷ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 51.

⁹⁸ Mathey, *The Impressionists*, 102.

resulting metaphor of ballet for painting (and the similar struggle each art faced during this period) provides a new understanding of Degas's contrived, repeated employment of conventional artistic methods and his transition into a new modern subject.

First, like painting, dance inherently invites an audience, and therefore also the viewer's interpretation of the moment presented. The former also provided an outlet for this exploration of pictorial devices, as it afforded a vocabulary of *gestes* developed from tradition but still employed in Degas's time. As Lemoisne asserts, the artist's keen observation and artistic approach allowed him to capture "the beauty of the lines in bold and exceptional movements" as well as "the grace of a *geste* and an attitude."⁹⁹ Ballet's positions, codified movements, and methods for training (such as dancing on stage or at the barre) supplied Degas with movements and gestures so repeated among dancers that their movement became a new kind of visual language (as Goncourt noted, "the language of the dance"). The choreography of the dancers' movements also parallels Degas's compositional construction. Both entail the arrangement of form, achieved through the use of a set vocabulary of poses. Liebermann even referred to Degas's compositional constructions as "so good" that "their composition...is not evident."¹⁰⁰ This careful configuration made Degas's painting exemplify "*la mise en toile*," as Liebermann called it, evoking the image of a work of theater being *mise en scène*.¹⁰¹ Despite the theatrical implication dance makes, Degas opaques these qualities through repetition and traditional painterly methods. Liebermann affirms that "no modern painter" eliminates "literary interest so entirely" as Degas. Despite the theatrical subject and corresponding poses, Degas still managed

⁹⁹ Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 83: "la beauté des lignes dans les mouvements hardis et inhabituels," "la grâce d'un geste et d'une attitude."

¹⁰⁰ Max Liebermann, "Degas," *The Artist: An Illustrated Monthly Record of Arts, Crafts, and Industries (American Edition)* Vol. 28, No. 247 (Aug. 1900): 117.

¹⁰¹ Liebermann, "Degas," 117.

to negate the conventional narrative of Academic art but did so through repeating Old Master methods in reformulated manner.¹⁰²

This effort entailed in composing—especially for Degas, to achieve originality through repetition and the quotation of used, familiar visual language—translates to the labor of creation of both arts. Degas noted in a sonnet from 1889 how prima ballerinas were “but queens made by distance and greasepaint”;¹⁰³ and according to his idol Ingres, dancers were “disfigured by their efforts.”¹⁰⁴ Both artists and dancers followed extensive, conventionalized educations to gain the methods needed to create original art (in dance especially, original creation can spring only from combinations of a set of finite, repeatable poses). Furthermore, they achieved this instruction through the repetition of the art of their predecessors. Degas’s efforts to depict this exhaustive and involved art, in both rehearsals and performances, simultaneously exposed his own complex methods of representation, which constantly drew from his education. While Degas may have “portrayed the unbridled expression after the dancers let fall their mask” or the “regulated play of these tortured puppets,” he too exposed the methods of his craftsmanship in his works showcasing ballet.¹⁰⁵ Jeannot describes the physical, manual creation Degas exerted in creating depictions of dancers, noting how the artist “crushed...with his finger” the pastels onto the surface and used palettes that were “at once violent and soft to the eye.”¹⁰⁶ His carefully formulated compositions, often variants and repeating figures from others, and techniques proved a rigorous intellectual exercise in constant recombination and repetition to create an original work.

¹⁰² Liebermann, “Degas,” 118.

¹⁰³ Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 83: “que les reines [qui] se font de distance et de fard.”

¹⁰⁴ Ingres as cited by Richard Kendall and Jill DeVonyar, *Degas and the Dance* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2002), 90.

¹⁰⁵ Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 58.

¹⁰⁶ Jeannot, “Souvenirs de Degas,” 153, 170: “écrasa...avec le doigt,” “violent et doux à l’oeil tout ensemble.”

Exemplary of painting's and dance's reliance upon artificial methods, repetition encompasses dance's *répétition* (dance rehearsal) as well as Degas's prolific compositional and figural repetition. It also connotes the creation of replica, an imitation and function that recalls the expectation of painting to replicate nature or represent movement. This concept, already exposed in Degas's education with his extensive copies and repetition of Old Masters' methods, becomes a central element of Degas's dance pictures and later working method. Over the course of his career, the artist employed different kinds of repetition, including returns to a specific subject, painting, figure (either repeated in the same work and/or reused in another composition), or group of figures. Additionally, repetitive acts blur the boundary between natural action and artificial pose. Some movements that could be deemed "posed" become natural in some instances: for example, sitting on a bench readjusting a toe shoe can be visually captured only in so many ways. This balance of artifice and genuine movement recalls Duranty's claim of German painters' *gestes* being natural, although clearly contrived and designed, as well as Liebermann's claim that Degas's pictures are so well composed that no composition is evident. Therefore, repetition of working method and conventional pictorial structures, but in modern applications, gave rise not only to a distinct painting at once traditional and modern, but also art that retained naturalism through unnatural design. Of Degas's ten submissions to the exhibition that became known as the Impressionists' first in 1874, *Répétition d'un ballet sur la scène* received the most notice and exemplified a daring commitment to confronting theatricality and artifice while achieving modernity through Old Master means. The painting, mistaken as a drawing by many of its viewers, demonstrates Degas's stance on issues of artifice and repetition.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ This mistake is understandable, as it was subtitled in the catalogue as a "dessin." As Carol Armstrong (in *Odd Man Out*) and George Shackelford (in *Degas: The Dancers*) demonstrate, confusion with identifying

Aptly-named, *La Répétition d'un ballet sur la scène* (1874, Musée d'Orsay) addresses the theatrical element of his subject but also exercises all uses of repetition of his working method. It presents a rehearsal of fifteen ballet dancers: seven occupy the lower left corner, closest to the viewer; another two are barely visible emerging onto the stage from the wings; the other six occupy the opposite end of the stage, performing immediately in front of a seated man (surely an *abonné*). The viewer looks onto the scene from stage right, his perspective defined by the canvas that visually crops the composition. This latter method leaves the viewer's position ambiguous. Degas could be seating us in a box, or, more likely, placing us on stage in a position mirroring the male viewer at the left. (Coincidentally, if the former, this view would be impossible for the average subscriber. This would be the first, premier box, reserved for visiting dignitaries and diplomats.¹⁰⁸) If we do sit on stage next to the dancers, they have not noticed. The group rests, as one scratches her back while sitting on a bench, another adjusts her shoe, several stretch, and another turns entirely from the viewer and the scene. The effect of artificial light transforms the dancers into porcelain, ghost-like figures. All aspects of the subject reflect artifice, as they are either practicing a choreographed dance or not moving at all, reminding us that we are viewing a static image incapable of motion. Noticeable vestiges of earlier designs in the lower left and upper right corners reveal Degas's emphasis on the artifice of the scene and his craftsmanship.

some paintings and disagreement often occurred among art historians and critics. Armstrong illustrates this problem stemming from Degas's repetition with *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage* (c. 1874, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *The Rehearsal Onstage* (1874?, Metropolitan Museum). The two works she highlights as causing confusion in reviewing criticisms of Degas's exhibited works (the former an amalgam of media including pastel, oils thinned with turpentine, and watercolor—the latter pastel over a brush-and-ink drawing) may also be confused with Musée d'Orsay's *La Répétition d'un ballet sur la scène*. All three showcase near-identical groups of dancers on stage and utilize the same viewpoint. Degas offers a tool for differentiation through the presence of two necks of double basses (the 1874 oil-watercolor-pastel at the Metropolitan), just one (the tentatively dated 1874 pastel at the Metropolitan), or none at all (the oil on canvas at Musée d'Orsay). Similarly, Shackelford points out the compositional mirroring with Degas's two early treatments of the subject, in his two works from the first half of the decade both entitled *The Dance Class*, now in Musée d'Orsay and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

¹⁰⁸ Kendall and DeVonyar, *Degas and the dance*, 58.

To the right of the turned, standing figure, a foot is clearly visible; to the right of the seated man, one can discern another *abonné*, leaning backward against the wall downstage left.¹⁰⁹ While these changes could have been easily concealed, Degas allowed them to remain in the final composition.

Répétition represents Degas's foray into the subject and anticipates his prolific studies and repeating of figural types of dancers throughout his career. Degas repeats figures from *Répétition* in contemporary works and also repeats the overall composition three times. This painting demonstrates how his technique of self-citation, undoubtedly learned from his study of masters like Poussin and Ingres, became one of the most frequent methods Degas used throughout his career. The figure sitting on the bench and scratching her back appears in several known studies as well as other finished compositions, such as *Classe de danse* (1874, Musée d'Orsay) as well as the two variations on *Répétition* (both c. 1874, Metropolitan Museum of Art).¹¹⁰ This excessive repetition of figures also makes it difficult to determine when exactly Degas first developed certain figural types. For example, the dancer *en pointe* at the right in *Répétition* appears in two contemporary paintings and the two variants at the Metropolitan.¹¹¹ The figure entering onto the stage at the center of the painting was also repeated in *Le Foyer de danse* (1872, Metropolitan Museum) and *Le Foyer de danse* (1872, Musée du Louvre), although mirrored and rotated at an angle, respectively.

In addition to Degas's own figural repetition and self-citation, he also relied upon his studies of Old Masters. The figure yawning in the lower left, for example, evokes both

¹⁰⁹ This figure merits comparison to Degas's portrait of Manet in *Portrait of Monsieur and Madame Manet*, executed only a few years before in 1868-69 (Municipal Museum of Art, Kitakyushu, Japan): the exaggerated lean backward of both bear considerable similarities.

¹¹⁰ The two variations of this composition are *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage* (c. 1874, Metropolitan Museum) and *The Rehearsal Onstage* (1874?, Metropolitan Museum).

¹¹¹ *Rehearsal of the Ballet* (c. 1876), Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; *Two Dancers on a Stage* (c. 1874), Courtauld Gallery; and both subsequent variations executed c. 1874 now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Michelangelo's *Dying slave* as well as the crucified figure on the right in Mantegna's *Calvary*, both of which Degas copied.¹¹² This *geste* was also repeated by one of Degas's favorite draftsmen, Honoré Daumier, in *Trois heures du matin...* of 1847. The figure adjusting her shoe in *Répétition* also evokes imagery copied by Degas, in particular a sketch entitled *Sommeil*, which Degas kept in his studio until the end of his life (this particular figure may have also been a model for a variation on this pose, with the dancer seated on a bench with one leg raised and bent).¹¹³ References to the Old Masters also appear subtly in Degas's use of *gestes*. The dancers yawn, stretch, and adjust their shoes and costumes. Their movements and poses connote the labor involved in this activity, for which Degas expended comparable labor in terms of artistic methods.

The citation of these *gestes*, however, does not enable narrative: it represents another repeated device of the Old Masters but used in a modern application. These *gestes* suggest a legible narrative exists, especially given the apparent familiarity of the subject; but the composition does not explain why, for instance, one group rehearses while another rests on the same stage or which ballet they perform. Even with conventional visual cues, on a stage no less, the painting still resists theater. For all these reasons, *Répétition* presents artifice thematized; it is not spontaneously created, but instead pre-meditated and carefully designed. As I will go on to argue in the next section, this difference of careful composing distinguishes him from the artistic avant-garde of the time—the group that became known as the Impressionists—as they forfeited all the traditional “restrained methods” Meier-Graefe noted in favor of complete independence from the Académie's sanctioned subjects and methods. To reconcile artistic convention with

¹¹² Study after *Dying Slave* (Vente IV, lot 99a and Vente IV, 130b) and after *Calvary* (Vente IV, lot 99c and Vente I, lot 103).

¹¹³ Vente IV, lot 130.

modern art's new resistance to a viewer, Degas sought to establish a "salon of realists."¹¹⁴ This salon, which became the First Impressionist exhibition, allowed him to exhibit art that held onto formal, established methods but forged into the new territory of modernism.

Plein air v. the pose

At the now infamous exhibition held in Nadar's studio on the Boulevard des Capucines in the spring of 1874, which became known as the First Impressionist show, Degas had the opportunity to develop a new forum for modern art. But a conflict soon emerged in the form of a dichotomy between the *plein air* landscape painters and the figure painters. Of the group of approximately 160 works, about 60 were landscapes and the rest paintings of figures (including etchings after Old Masters and a few sculptures). Two years later, in writing about the group's second exhibition, Duranty noted how some

set off to transform tradition and endeavor to translate the modern world without pulling away too much from the ancient and magnificent formulas that served to express the worlds of our precedents, while others abandon all at once the predecessors' ways.¹¹⁵

In other words, for Duranty, the two groups emerging from the Impressionist circle are those reverent of tradition and those who abandon it entirely. Those reverent of "ancient and magnificent formulas"—Degas of course exemplifying this camp—could be interchangeable with the figure painters. The landscapists, led by Monet, readily identify themselves as the "others" Duranty described, as their subject and methods abandoned entirely the traditional standard. Despite being among the minority, Monet's landscape, *Impression, soleil levant* (1872, Musée Marmottan) defined the paradigm of Impressionism and proved the most provocative

¹¹⁴ Edgar Degas, *Degas Letters*, ed Marcel Guérin and trans. Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, Publishers, Ltd., 1947), 39.

¹¹⁵ Edmond Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1876), 19: "...les uns se bornent à transformer la tradition et s'efforcent de traduire le monde moderne sans beaucoup s'écarter des anciennes et magnifiques formules qui ont servi à exprimer les mondes précédents, les autres écartent d'un coup les procédés d'autrefois."

work of the exhibition. For Degas, arguably the most involved organizer of the show and devoted figure painter, the attention to landscape painters and the example set by Monet were most likely disturbing developments.

The Impressionist landscapes, exemplified by Monet's art, neither predicated a formal artistic education nor a compositional methodology. In other words, copying paintings by Poussin or sketching after antique sculpture would not aid or inform a landscape painter, who sought only to represent the visible and tangible subject before him. As Zola criticized, the Impressionists dealt "the last blow" to "classic and romantic painting...it is a realistic movement begun by Courbet, freed from *technique*, enlarged by analysis."¹¹⁶ Additionally, because the landscape was the sole model needed to realize the painting—that is, the composition's structure and details are predetermined by the natural model—the methods Degas meticulously studied and explored, such as compositional variation, construction, reference to shared visual vocabulary, and of course repetition, were superfluous to the Impressionist. As Mathey stated in his account of the movement, the "Impressionist, in overthrowing the old, gave birth to a new tradition."¹¹⁷ Degas, however, never abandoned the traditional methods he gained during his period of self-formation.

Monet, therefore, becomes a foil for Degas. This opposition is clearly illustrated by Monet's relinquishment of traditional education, methods, and subjects in contrast to Degas's copying and commitment to the figure.¹¹⁸ By painting *en plein air* and eventually abandoning references to the figure altogether, Monet forfeited Academic methods and the artist's imposition

¹¹⁶ Zola as cited by Bertall, "Impressionism in France," *American Art Review* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1879): 34.

¹¹⁷ Mathey, *The Impressionists*, 2.

¹¹⁸ Upon arriving to Paris, Monet also followed initially the Academic track, as he was encouraged to study in Gleyre's atelier. Begrudgingly he did so and was apparently criticized by the maître for his failure to "keep antiquity in mind" when painting (Mathey, *The Impressionists*, 42). This short education may have also persuaded Monet to abandon the conventions of French art altogether by pursuing almost exclusively the natural and sometimes urban landscape.

of order and design to the composition. Those affiliated with the Académie surely opposed Impressionism in part for this reason: as one partisan recalled, “the Impressionists disdained above all the meditated and conscious practices and habits that had always dominated French art.”¹¹⁹ The Impressionists’ independence from traditional methods therefore was as much an political revolution as it was an artistic one, as severing ties with the Académie also meant the French state. Mathey proffers a reasoning for this rejection of French painterly practice, stating that “no artist can successfully escape the age in which he lives—at best, he can reject it.”¹²⁰ Indeed, Monet rejected all aspects of the painting and art Degas fervently admired and studied. He loathed the Louvre (even literally turning his back upon the art on its walls to paint views of the natural and urban landscape such as *Garden of the Princess*¹²¹) and “detested Ingres.”¹²²

The ultimate escape from tired, Academic pictorial tradition, nature afforded a subject removed from all artistic convention; it escaped theatricality entirely, or so he believed. Representing the absence of all human invention and unable to be rearranged or manipulated for the artist’s compositional purposes, the landscape *could not pose*. This resistance to an arrangement by the artist and to serving as a spectacle for the audience was, paradoxically, modern, in that it disables the viewer from being an audience—this is Impressionism’s contribution to modern art. Along with Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Armand Guillaumin formed the group of artists committed to painting the landscape *en plein air*. Like Monet, they do not observe the traditional hierarchy of painting—placing the landscape above all

¹¹⁹ Gustave Larroumet, *L’Art et l’état en France* (Paris: Hachette, 1895), 120: “les impressionnistes dédaignaient de très haut les habitudes réfléchies et consciencieuses qui avait toujours dominé dans l’art français.”

¹²⁰ Mathey, *The Impressionists*, 7.

¹²¹ *Garden of the Princess, Louvre (Le Jardin de l’Infante)* (1867, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College).

¹²² John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 66.

other genres—and adopt the improvisational technique, which ignores the painting methods of tradition.

While Monet produced art resisting all reference to formal education and subjects that could pose, Degas maintained his observance of modernism as an evolution, recombination, and repetition of the traditional and conventional in art. Mathey even referred to Degas as “the Classicist of Impressionism,” in part for his aesthetic that treated traditionally “elegant” subjects with which Ingres “would not have disagreed.”¹²³ The works he presented in 1874, as all following examples he showed with this group, were focused on the human figure. Despite the modern subjects of these scenes featuring ballet dancers, laundresses, and jockeys, critics recognized Degas’s knowledge of past art. At the landmark exhibition in 1874, French art critic Philippe Burty noticed this reverence for tradition, remarking that Degas was “at once the least revolutionary and the most scholarly of member of this group... a man of genius.”¹²⁴ (In complete contrast, referring to Monet and his immediate followers, Burty claims to believe that “nobody exists for them” and that any comparison to members of the Barbizon School would likely “offend” these artists, determined to be entirely original.¹²⁵) In line with Degas, Félix Bracquemond, Berthe Morisot, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir formed the group of artists devoted to the figure and cognizant of tradition.¹²⁶ Bracquemond, for example, exhibited mostly etchings and engravings in the 1874 show, copies after Old Masters like Leys, Holbein, and Rubens as well as contemporary artists like Ingres and Manet. Like Degas, Morisot had also copied in the Louvre and remained foremost a figure painter (although she too painted landscapes, but these

¹²³ Mathey, *The Impressionists*, 98.

¹²⁴ Burty in 1874, as reproduced by Ruth Berson, *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886 [Vol. I Reviews]* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 10.

¹²⁵ Burty in 1874, as reproduced by Berson, *The New Painting [Vol. I]*, 10.

¹²⁶ Three other lesser-known artists, Astruc, Brandon, and Cals, also exhibited almost exclusively paintings of the figure.

works often focused upon a figure). Renoir, like Degas, also partook in a fairly formal education and adopted similar methods and subjects throughout his career that referenced this background.¹²⁷

Degas's unique employment of repeated methods, interest in dance, and re-implementation of traditional approaches are further emphasized by its antithesis: Monet's *Impression, soleil levant*. Although Monet's painting has been incessantly mined for meaning and methods to understanding Impressionism, it bears discussion to demonstrate Degas's symmetrically opposed methods. Where Degas studied, carefully constructed, and manipulated aspects of his composition, Monet painted freely, to record evanescent, natural, and optical phenomena. A defining work of Impressionism, *Impression, soleil levant* depicts the transient moment of a morning sunrise. The viewer overlooks a port's harbor (Le Havre), which separates the viewer from the indistinct industrial structures in the background. This division aligns the viewer's space with nature as opposed to machines of human construction. The harbor merges almost seamlessly with the sky above, as one washes into the other under the painter's indiscriminate brush. The sun, a circle of saturated bright orange, lingers slightly above and to the right of the center of the canvas. To the left and below this center, a small boat occupied by two figures sits in the water. These figures, as well as another indistinct group further in the background to the left, are simply accessories to the landscape; Monet emphasizes his main interest in light not only through the figures' reduction to shadow-like presence, but also the thick strokes of orange of the water highlighting the sun's reflection.

¹²⁷ This parallel presents an interesting tangent that could unfortunately not be examined in the scope of this thesis. Like Degas, Renoir possessed a significant artistic background and was cognizant of past art. Significantly, it was he who compared Degas's dancers to figures from the Parthenon. His own work also demonstrates similarities to Degas's: his bathers, for example, were also figures developed individually and formed into a composition. Also like Degas, he often repeated the same subjects and figures in different works. Among the others included in the Impressionist circle, Renoir (after Degas) proved the most resistant to adopting the landscape as his primary subject.

To capture the transient, Monet demonstrates an application of equally transient and spontaneous methods of execution. The predominantly monochromatic palette, frenzied brushstroke that preserves the labor and presence of the artist's hand, the indistinct quality of form, and seemingly incomplete areas (such as the lower right corner, a whiter area that appears less handled) all evidence his abandonment of traditional compositional planning and conventional modes of execution. Monet emphasizes foremost in this work a resistance to traditional composition, not just his interests in light and landscape. While the composition maintains a balance—the sun and prominent vessel lie along a diagonal passing through the center of the painting, which lend it balance—the composition is fairly fluid, appearing entirely improvised and inspired solely by vision as opposed to intellect (the *fiction* of immediacy is undeniable in the work).

Monet and the Theater of Immediacy

While Impressionists like Monet adopted subjects removed from convention and traditional, compositional methods, there still existed a problem for Degas. As he stated, “even in front of nature one must compose... A painting is an original combination of lines and hues that suit each other.”¹²⁸ But the landscapists' art relieved the painter of the invention of this “original combination.” As Duranty noted, their art sprung from natural light, which “pushed them to reproduce the constant sensation that had hit them.”¹²⁹ Impressionists like Monet sought through spontaneous methods to achieve the look of a spontaneous, un-posed subject; however, as Degas declared, “composing” could not be abandoned.

¹²⁸ Degas as cited by Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 86: “Même d'après la nature il faut composer... un tableau est une combinaison originale de lignes et de tons qui se font valoir.”

¹²⁹ Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture*, 21: “les a poussés à reproduire la sensation constant dont ils étaient frappés.”

The art critic Félix Fénéon (1861-1944)¹³⁰ highlighted this problem that arose with spontaneous creation from nature, a model that could theoretically not pose. In his review of one of the Impressionists' last exhibitions, Fénéon correctly identified their aims: "to imprint one of these fugitive appearances on the canvas was their goal.—From this resulted the necessity of taking a landscape in one sitting." But for Fénéon, this method of capturing the fleeting was a trap and created the artifice their artistic methods and subject sought to escape. This approach caused that "propensity to make nature grimace" through its fervor to render a transient moment. Indeed, as Fénéon continued, Impressionists adopted this seemingly improvisatory method "in order to prove definitively that the moment was unique and that one would never see it again."¹³¹ Therefore, the Impressionist approach—as seen in *Impression*, for example—was inherently flawed. To capture the transient with improvised and inconsistent technique threatened to turn the model, nature, into a kind of theater. In *Impression*, Monet's exaggeration of light, palette, and loose brushwork in an apparently spontaneous working method give rise to an exaggeration of subject. In Monet's hands, nature becomes unnatural; it "grimaces" for the artist as if to force the transience of the moment. This desire to showcase an evanescent subject proved an exaggeration of subject as theatrical as Poussin's clearly choreographed *Sabines*. Monet's intent

¹³⁰ Over the course of research, Félix Fénéon emerged as an especially observant critic of the Impressionists and later the Neo-Impressionists. Fénéon was among the few critics, for example, who noted Degas's frequent repetition and reuse of figures. As he stated in his review of the Impressionists' 1886 show, "M. Degas never copies after nature: he accumulates a number of studies of one subject out of which he mines work of unquestionable truth; never have paintings evoked less the painful image of the 'model' who 'poses'" (Fénéon, *Oeuvres*, 31).

¹³¹ Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Paulhan (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 73: "Le spectacle du ciel, de l'eau, des verdure varie d'instant en instant, professaient les premiers impressionistes. Empreindre une de ces fugitives aparences sur le subjectile, c'est le but. —De là résultaient la nécessité d'enlever un paysage en une séance et une propension à faire grimacer la nature pour bien prouver que la minute était unique et qu'on ne la reverrait jamais plus."

to capture what Fénéon called “the moment that was unique and that one would never see again,” became as deadening formula as the French painterly conventions he had forsworn.¹³²

First, eliminating the model does not remove the difficulty involved in painting; the artist must still shape his vision and render it with paint. Degas once complained about such a lack of visual structure in Monet’s work. Upon seeing Monet’s work at the Durand-Ruel galleries, Degas claimed he had to leave after only a few minutes because the “paintings gave [him] vertigo.”¹³³ Degas’s complaint suggests both traditional and modern painting needed an underlying framework, the *designo* mandated by Academic painting. Fittingly, Ronald Bernier suggests Monet’s compositional structure may be called one “of spontaneity,” defined by “a deliberate indirectness of procedure” which perpetuated the sense of ephemeral moment and equally spontaneous painting.¹³⁴ In other words, the structural directive Monet followed was in fact a lack of compositional structure: his painting developed as a result of working method. But without the employment of compositional planning—however conventional and overused these methods may have appeared to Monet—the composition fractures and collapses into a crowding of paint, disabling in some cases the actual viewing of the work.

Second, art is artificial, nature is not: a resistance will always exist between them. While nature may be immune to actively posing for the artist (and for the audience), resisting all

¹³² Other contemporary critics noted this evident transience of working method, as well as the lack of the expected finish to the painting. There does emerge, however, some difference of opinion as to whether Monet finished works in a single sitting or returned to rework his paintings. The critique of his painting as an “ébauche” or study often used by critics like Ernest Chesnau would suggest most assumed it was undertaken in a single sitting. Others, however, like Ronald Bernier’s recent scholarship, argues that the improvisatory methods sustain “the appearance of long and calculated efforts of painting,” giving rise to Monet’s adoption of an internal painterly compositional structure, which he dubs “the structure of spontaneity” (Bernier, *Monument, Moment, and Memory*, 13, 18). Regardless, however of whether Monet completed the painting in a single sitting or through multiple sittings, Fénéon’s criticism still resonates. The ephemeral quality of the moment presented appears even more forced and contrived (or “grimacing”) through Monet’s adoption of spontaneous methods of execution, an effect that would have been mitigated through an employment of conventional methods, or at least, compositional planning.

¹³³ Gimpel, *Journal*, 179: “tableaux m’ont donné le vertige.”

¹³⁴ Ronald Bernier, *Monument, Moment, and Memory* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 31.

aspects of narrative and theater, the artist must still use it as a model. Nature supplies the vision the artist uses to witness a transient moment, which he then puts onto canvas. In order to capture nature, the artist must maintain an objective perspective, painting what he sees in life but also painting to render an artistic vision, as Valéry had affirmed in his writings about draftsmanship. (This fundamental technique Monet notably abandoned, using instead broken, fragmented strokes of paint to visually sculpt his subject.) Monet's interests clearly lay in the first aspect of the artistic vision Valéry defined, that of seeing the subject (and not using the artist's will to subdue this vision into one suitable for artistic media). In contrast, Degas uses both objective and subjective qualities of observation. Objective vision, through the application and repetition of conventional methods, enabled his development of highly subjective vision to produce images of modern life.

Third, artistic representations of nature like Monet's are therefore not intellectual. No preconception or education was needed; only nature as a model. As Duranty observed, "almost all the landscapists lack the sense of *construction* [author's emphasis] of the ground."¹³⁵ In forfeiting the tried methods of representation, Monet cedes artistic control to his subject. This disabling of the artist's mastery over his subject is problematic and causes the "grimace" effect Fénéon so astutely observed. The problem with this abandonment would have reinforced Degas's dedication to figuration, traditional techniques, and modern compositional invention. For Degas, art required an education and should serve as an intellectual exercise for the artist in creating it and the audience in viewing it.

¹³⁵ Duranty, *La Nouvelle peinture*, 30: "le sens de la *construction* [author's emphasis] du sol manque à presque tous les paysagistes."

Artificial, conventional constructions for modernity

Degas employed his Old Master techniques and repetitive methods to treat a subject inherently linked to theater and artifice designed for an audience. His proclamation that “nothing in art should resemble an accident, even movement”¹³⁶ further underscores his commitment to tradition’s conventions as the tools that could be manipulated to create modern art. Ultimately he concretized a method, built upon draftsmanship, repetition, compositional variation, and a few choice subjects thematizing spectacle and artifice (a decision that parallels the Old Masters’ chosen themes of history, allegory, and mythology). These methods, especially repetition, enabled him to develop his own figural types and *gestes* to accompany the preexisting visual language he appropriated from the study of the Old Masters and from dance itself. These highly developed and internalized working methods supplied Degas with components to assemble into a potentially infinite number of compositions, all linked to tradition but all original.

The Rehearsal (c. 1873, Fogg Art Museum), *The Dance School* (1876, Shelburne Museum, Vermont), and *The Dance School* (1879, Frick Collection), executed throughout the 1870s, exemplify Degas’s extensive use of repetition, variation of compositional design, and figures as a formula for original modes of production. The dance class scenes are not only variants of one another—a repetition comparable to *Répétition* and the *Dance Class* paintings—but they also utilize figures the artist developed individually, repeated in multiple studies, and reused in other compositions. These three paintings epitomize Degas’s experimentation with conventional modes of compositional planning and technical methods, as well as prolific self-citation, an approach that allowed him to employ worn conventions in modern ways.

¹³⁶ Edgar Degas, *Lettres*, ed. Marcel Guérin (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1945), 119: “rien en art ne doit ressembler à un accident, même le mouvement.”

Likely the first he painted, the Fogg Art Museum's *The Rehearsal* (c. 1873, Fogg Art Museum) represents Degas's starting point for this group of works. As in his earliest works of dancers in rehearsal from the 1870s, Degas gives us a clearly defined space, recognized by Lemoisne, Reff, and Brame as the ground floor classroom of Le Pelletier's opera house (destroyed by fire in 1873). The perspective places the viewer a comfortable distance from the violinist playing in the left corner, the dancers rehearsing in the center of the room, and the dancers stretching on the back wall between the French windows. Despite the prominence of the windows, light from the exterior filters weakly into the space, inhibiting our ability to discern the dancers' individual faces. A significant empty space dominates the right half of the painting; but the diagonal formed by the rows of dancers anticipates movement into this void, towards the beholder.

As in *Répétition d'un ballet sur la scène*, however, Degas inhibits narrative through repetition and a complex compositional structure. For example, he repeats a dancer practicing four times to form a group and another dancer type looking at her turnout twice (she appears on the far left, by the violinist, then again turned towards the right by the window). With Degas's adoption of modern subject, Old Masters' influence appears with his development of his figures. Instead of appropriating figures directly from Old Masters works, he developed his own in multiple studies. In actuality, the composition can be simplified to four figural components: the violinist, the practicing dancer, the dancer at the barre, and the standing dancer examining her feet. The second and fourth are repeated within the composition itself, the other two appear in other compositions. Extensive studies precede these four figures. Degas's repetition of Old Masters figuration therefore developed into *self-citation*, but one developed through his

understanding of the copyist practice and incessant employment of these challenging and laborious compositional strategies.

The structure of the painting, however, does appear to derive directly from his studies of conventional, traditional art. The subject presented—a dance rehearsal, a preparation for performance—immediately invites the beholder’s contemplation. Furthermore, the distance placed between the viewer and the dancers mimics the distinction that occurs between performers on a stage and an audience below, even though the setting is a rehearsal studio. The accessibility of the figures to the beholder’s regard also recalls Degas’s copy of Poussin, with its suspension of movement, the choreography of the figures to ensure omniscient viewing, and the clearly defined (and recognizable) space. But ultimately, this apparent familiarity, inviting the beholder’s contemplation, does not solidify. Unlike the figures in *Rape of the Sabines*, these figures do not turn out towards or make note of the beholder. Absorbed in their activity, the dancers further remove themselves from the viewer through their distance, indistinguishable faces, and engagement in their own art, dance. This resistance remains, despite the obvious theatrical constructions and subject linked to theater.

About three years later in 1876, Degas revisited this scene and painted another *Dance School* (1876), now located in the Shelburne Museum in Vermont. In this version, Degas has moved us closer to the dancers and the violinist, and introduced a ballet master to the scene. No longer a distant viewer, a tutu in the lower left corner and the angle of the violinist’s chair force the viewer into the scene with the dancers (and looking down upon them, as the odd perspective created by the chair suggests). In comparison with the 1873 painting, the viewer has changed from privileged onlooker to member of the rehearsal. The same dancers appear in near-identical groupings but their diagonal arrangement is more pronounced. Degas has simplified the room,

eliminating one of the French windows, and also emphasized the potential of movement across the room towards the viewer's right, with the addition of a clearly lined parquet floor.

As in the Fogg's painting, repetition occurs with the figures and the conventional pictorial structures, but this re-employment makes Degas's composition increasingly complex and modern. Its commitment to the contingent, through traditional methods, becomes more apparent, yet it still resists narrative. Within the painting, the three dancers practicing reappear and the dancer examining her footwork also appears twice (although the figure on the left now turns facing the viewer). The artist also appears to have forced a repetition of the ballet master: he appears standing at far the left in profile and sitting in the chair under the viewer, playing the violin. The violinist pictured was in fact modeled after Jules Perrot, the ballet master who makes several appearances in Degas's oeuvre.¹³⁷ This example illustrates how Degas would manipulate and alter figures from their original context, whether taken from other art or from life. In the case of the violinist, the artist sacrifices Perrot's identity to create a new figure, apparently the twin of the master at the left. Degas also disregarded the design of the actual space, manipulating it to the whims of his artistic vision (spurred, of course, by memory, as this opera house burned soon after his completion of *Rehearsal* in 1873.) Through repetitive methods and reformulation of traditional compositional structures, therefore, Degas negates the immediate familiarity of the image, as well as the expectation of spectacle. The visual cropping of the image contributes to Degas's defeat of theater in this work, despite the performance of dancers dancing. The tutu in the lower left corner and the dancer whose body disappears in front of the violinist all force the viewer to question what exactly Degas presents. Visual disjunction also occurs, notably, with the peculiar perspective of the musician's chair and the three dancers practicing in front of him at the left. An odd visual play ensues: the dancer at the front of the trio, as well as the two dancers

¹³⁷ A study of this figure for this composition was sold in the sale of Degas's atelier (Vente III, lot 157a).

behind her, does not stand far enough away from the violinist and dancer examining her foot. The dancer and violinist appear to be larger than life-size in comparison to this figure. Upon further inspection, this distortion in perspective also applies to the ballet master at the left and the other two dancers practicing. As in the Fogg's painting, the dancers ignore the presence of the viewer; however, here, they also actively resist the viewer and an anticipation of conventional painting through Degas's complex, modern manipulation of the image and its artificial constructions.

The last of this group to be painted, *The Rehearsal* (1879, Frick Collection) marks Degas's final and most successful attempt at this particular series. The most radical of the three closely related works, it forces the practicing dancers to nearly collide with the viewer. This effect occurs through Degas's careful construction, which both draws in and forces out the viewer. His presentation of the dance studio drawn to near abstraction opens the space up to the beholder. The artist's space defies unity. For instance, the lines of the floor do not fit the space that the walls define. Degas further grasps the transient moment through his decisive simplification of this composition, which presents only those actively rehearsing to the violinist's tune. At first glance, the subjects seem entirely accessible to the beholder. The musician faces us directly, sitting so close to the edge of the frame his seated half is no longer visible. This visual cropping also applies to the dancers, one of whom has only an extended calf and knee inside the frame. The close proximity of the viewer to the dancers and musician immediately establishes a familiarity with the subjects.

But Degas immediately shatters this sensation. The figures with whom the viewer is meant to interact—the dancers—are illegible. The face of the dancer immediately behind the musician, for example, is almost mask-like: the hollowed eyes and shadowed face indicate

effacement of identity and cause the subject to resist the viewer. The dancer on the right, wearing the yellow scarf, also defies visual understanding: her torso, cropped by the fourth anonymous dancer's leg, does not match up with her own legs. In this instance, her lower half and torso do not align properly, but her tutu mitigates this disjunction. The dancer at the far left experiences the same problem. Her red tights draw the eye to her extended legs; but her left leg is placed too far to the left. This impossible contortion, however, in addition to the violinist's acutely twisted hand, further connotes the labor involved with the performance of the art, mirroring of course Degas's labor entailed in representing it. (Interestingly, it would also seem Degas inserted the violinist last. A faint signature appears above and to the left of the musician's shoulder, while another signature is clear in the lower right. The double signature may be the result of the late addition of the musician, which perhaps sat too close to the signature for Degas's taste.) At first Degas's composition tempts the viewer to step out of the way, to avoid running into the actively rehearsing dancers who seem poised to occupy the viewer's space. Degas's devices, however, that would perplex an attentive viewer also forge discomfort for the viewer in not being able to fully read what is presented as a familiar moment.

When Degas emphatically declared his preference for "*la vie factice*" over "*la vie naturelle*," he aligned himself with the artistic tradition of his predecessors and modernity through repetition. These three pictures all achieve a dynamism like *Interior*, but not through an overt resistance to narrative. The privileged position of the beholder establishes a familiar moment, a scene represented in a finite space with figures actively performing or about to perform. But the images soon maintain their resistance to the viewer's consumption through illegibility. Degas's distance placed between the viewer and figures, or harsh close proximity heightened by visual cropping as in the Frick's painting, destroys conventional theatrical

compositional structures. Especially when viewed together—as the Shelburne and Frick pictures were in the fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879¹³⁸—the methodical and careful implementation of design immediately presents itself to the viewer. This transparency of the painting’s construction and artifice parallels the subject it presents of dancers rehearsing, while revealing the conventional methods Degas had learned and was applying to his painting.

¹³⁸ Ernest May, who owned the Shelburne’s painting, apparently sent the work too late for it to be included in the catalogue. Two reviews, which both describe Degas’s *École de danse*, clearly describe the two paintings: Leroy notes the severe cropping of the dancer at the right in the Frick painting while Silvestre notes the gleaming “parquet,” not visible or emphasized in the Frick’s (Berson, *The New Painting [Vol. I]*, 227, 240).

Conclusion

Resisting the Impressionist focus of landscape and spontaneous execution practices, Degas never stopped searching for new methods and subjects that could be reconciled and reinvented through the employment of conventional techniques and compositional approaches. Throughout and after the end of the era of the Impressionist exhibitions, Degas continued to explore modernity with his dancers, but still did not abandon French tradition. Especially in the 1880s, Degas began to prolifically repeat certain dancer types, repeating studies and reusing some figures in as many as thirty different compositions. This practice, which characterized his working process until the end of his career, linked him methodologically to Old Masters and, paradoxically, enabled his creation of hundreds of original compositions. His constant reliance upon learned, traditional methods spurred his achievement of highly original works and continued his endless search of new combinations of media, techniques, and subjects to develop an original oeuvre capable of modernizing French artistic tradition.

The confluence of his education, repetition of developed figural types, modern composition, affinity for different combinations of media and study in his working practice, *Four Dancers* (c. 1900, National Gallery of Art) provides a fitting closure to this discussion. The monumental canvas immediately recalls the history painting tradition, demonstrates the draftsmanship valued by his Neoclassicist predecessors, and explicitly references the stage, the forum for theater (in life and in traditional, conventional art). But Degas quickly subverts this education, with his own modern composition structured through the repetition of figures. Four dancers emerge from the left, preparing to enter the *mise en scène* in the background at the right. The first on the far left stretches her left arm against leaf-covered wall separating the dancers from the main stage, as the other three adjust the epaulettes of their costumes. The beholder

stands so close to the figures that their skirts and legs disappear below the lower edge of the canvas.

While this close proximity immediately establishes a sense of familiarity—as seen throughout Degas’s modern works including *Interior*, the Frick’s *Dance class*, even the *Frieze* discussed in the introduction—this tangible imagery soon becomes foreign. The dancers’ skirts, for example, seem to meld entirely into one another; this fusion seems to suggest that the four dancers, like in the *Frieze*, may be in fact a single figure. Additionally, despite their placement on a stage, a beholder cannot construe a narrative, cannot definitively associate a ballet with the scene. The ambiguity of the image leaves a viewer to wonder whether the dancers are preparing to enter onto the stage, have just left it, or whether they occupy an actual stage at all. A natural world surrounds the dancers, as the partition against which the first dancer braces herself is covered in leaves; and in the background, it would appear *haystacks* extend onto a greater landscape.

As many scholars have noted, this modern composition grew in great part from Degas’s experiments with photography. The Bibliothèque Nationale holds many photograph stills of dancers in this same action of adjusting their costume taken by Degas; this new medium evidently became another method at his disposal to use to develop figural types. Even more so than the painting of a figure, the photograph predicated a conscious posing by the subject. The labor also entailed in posing—as Gimpel remembered, “one had to remain for three minutes without moving”¹³⁹—would also implicate an element of theater (active, laborious posing) to the process. But Degas’s photographs relating to these dancers were single figures, compiled into the composition by the artist. This working method, therefore, provided Degas the same kind of

¹³⁹ Gimpel, *Journal d’un collectionneur*, 432: “il fallait rester des trois minutes sans bouger.”

license gained through copying Old Masters' art: he drew from imagery already used and created, repeating it in his art but in new applications.

Other media and techniques, however, played just as significant a role in the painting's compositional and figural evolution. The *Four Dancers* have origins in sculpture, numerous studies and compositional variants, as well as tracings and counterproofs. Over forty known studies and variations¹⁴⁰ exist in the catalogue of Degas's work. Using tracing paper and counterproofs surely enabled Degas to achieve such a number of repetitions of the figures over a period of roughly five years. Degas learned about tracing paper from the son of his fellow painter (and art restorer) Luigi Chialiva sometime after 1897. The medium facilitated Degas's repetitive working method and would have appealed to the artist, as he was losing his vision by this time.¹⁴¹ He also used counterproofs to make studies for this composition and its variants, another Old Master method being used for modern means.

Produced through an amalgam of techniques and repeated dance figures developed by the artist, *Four Dancers* may also posit a commentary on the Impressionists' art, as exemplified by Monet. The landscape in the background containing the natural forms is not exceptional to Degas's depictions of dancers on stage—but the haystacks are. Only a few years before, Monet had also adopted a kind of repetition, but in the form of seriality and on a much smaller scale.

¹⁴⁰ From Lemoisne: 1235, 1247, 1248, 1249, 1267 (*Four Dancers*), 1268, 1269, 1270, 1271, 1271bis, 1272, 1273, 1274, 1274bis, 1275, 1276, 1277, 1278, 1279, 1280, 1344, 1345, 1345bis, 1346, 1347, 1348, 1349, 1350, 1351, 1352, 1353, 1354, 1355, 1355bis, 1356, 1357, 1358, 1359, 1360, 1361, 1363, 1416, 1417.

¹⁴¹ The painter-restorer Chialiva had discovered the paper through his son Jules Chialiva, who used it in his architecture curriculum at the École des Beaux-Arts. Jules Chialiva later recorded this anecdote and sent it to the *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*. What is not often noted, however, is that Jules Chialiva did not enter the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897 and, therefore, would not have enabled Degas's experimentation with tracing paper until this date or later (for confirmation of the date of his matriculation, see Delaire, Penanrun, and Roux, *Les Architectes de l'École des Beaux-Arts*, 46, 214). Therefore, while this account easily explains Degas's knowledge of the medium, it does not account for the proliferation of figures in his oeuvre before 1897. Rather than initiating Degas's figural repetition, tracing paper simply enabled him to continue this working technique. The title of Chialiva's letter—"Comment Degas a changé sa technique du dessin"—is therefore not entirely accurate, as tracing paper only facilitated the techniques Degas had learned from the Old Masters, specifically Poussin and Ingres, and employed since the beginning of his career.

From the façade of the Rouen cathedral to poplars to cliffs, Monet painted series of subjects, although in contrast to Degas these repetitions appeared more focused on depicting the difference of the same object's appearance. He exhibited haystacks at Durand-Ruel in May 1891 and gave poet Stéphane Mallarmé, by this time a close friend of Degas's, a painting of haystacks in 1890.¹⁴² If indeed a reference to these contemporary works by Monet, Degas's allusion to them in *Four Dancers* makes a forceful proclamation: in this monumental painting, the repetition of figures, emblematic of traditional art, precede this landscape and embody the tools that Degas used to achieve the modernism of his art. Degas's modernism does not sever its ties to past tradition and conventional composition like Monet's Impressionism through its effacement of the figure; and furthermore, it achieves modernity through its resistance to theater and clearly contemporary subject.

Degas's "rigorously Classical genius" implemented repetition in methods, imagery, and his own developed figural types from dance, in a modern framework to create a distinct *oeuvre*.¹⁴³ He was at once the Classicist among Impressionists and the avant-garde among Academic painters; through the unconventional, non-traditional implementation of repeated methods and imagery, Degas carved a distinct and influential niche for himself as the inheritor of French painterly tradition and genitor of the art Baudelaire described as both "eternal" and "modern."

¹⁴² Paul Tucker, *Monet in the '90s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 93-99.

¹⁴³ Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, 17: "génie rigoureusement classique."

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