



***The Milliners*, Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas**

The Milliners

Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas
French, about 1882–before
1905
Oil on canvas
23 5/8 x 29 1/2 in.
2005.14



Questions for Teaching

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What is the first thing you notice? What else do you notice?

Where do you think the women are? What do you see that makes you say that?

Mimic the poses and facial expressions of each of the women. What are they doing with their hands?

What do their poses and expressions reveal about their thoughts or feelings? (*The woman on the left is holding a ribbon. She looks like she is in the middle of working, but she does not seem happy or focused on work. The woman on the right is holding the hat in midair and looks like she is focused on the work at hand. Since her facial expression is not detailed, it is unclear what her feelings might be.*)

Look closely at the woman on the left. If she could speak, what do you think she would say?

Look closely at the woman on the right. If she could speak, what do you think she would say? How would you describe the use of space relative to each figure? What is the effect of this use of space? Why do you think Degas painted the hats and hat stands so that they partially cover the woman on the left? (*The hat stands in the **foreground** loom over the milliners as if overpowering them. The table in the **middle ground** is cluttered with ribbons, showing that there is much more work to be done.*)

Which colors do you see first? Where do you see these colors in the painting?

How does color help tell the story? Why do you think the ribbons are the brightest colors in the painting? (*Much of the work is painted with shades of reddish brown; the mood is gloomy as a result. The bright ribbons contrast with the gloomy milliners.*)

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Background Information

Two **milliners** sit at a dramatically angled worktable, their bodies partly obscured by the shadowed hat stands that crowd their workspace. Seen as little more than a silhouette, the figure at right works carefully on a hat. Her attentiveness is not shared by her older counterpart, who, though grasping a swath of pink fabric, appears lost in thought, gazing beyond the frame with a disquieting expression. The brightly colored ribbons—pink, yellow, orange, and green—draw attention to the drabness of the room and its inhabitants.

Over the course of about thirty years, Edgar Degas produced more than twenty paintings, **pastels**, and drawings of millinery shops. Among modern painters, Degas alone depicted this subject matter with such frequency. His voyeuristic yet empathetic **portrait** of the milliners' private world focuses on the physical hardship of their work. The woman at the left embodies the painter's concern; even at rest, her wiry body and pallid skin register a life of hard work and meager reward.

About the Artist

Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas (French, 1834–1917)

No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament . . . I know nothing.

—Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas

Born into a wealthy Parisian family, Degas devoted himself exclusively to painting without needing to sell a canvas. His training was conventional: he spent five years in Italy, studied the old masters in the Louvre, and trained at the École des Beaux-Arts. Fellow **Impressionist** Berthe Morisot remembered him saying that the study of nature was meaningless, since the art of painting was a question of conventions, and that it was by far the best thing to learn drawing from the German artist Hans Holbein (1497–1543). By the mid-1860s, Degas was turning to modern themes, particularly contemporary Parisian life. Unlike other Impressionists, he emphasized **composition** and drawing, and he usually did not paint outdoors. Degas was primarily concerned with depicting movement, from horses to women in various guises—dressing, bathing, and as cabaret performers. He painted the first of his ballet dancers around 1873. Almost blind for his last twenty years, Degas worked mostly in pastel with increasingly broad, free handling. He also made wax sculptures that were cast in bronze after he died.