



***The Convalescent*, Edgar Germaine Hilaire Degas**

The Convalescent

Edgar Germaine Hilaire Degas
French, Louisiana, about 1872–
January 1887
Oil on canvas
25 5/8 x 18 1/2 in.
2002.57



Questions for Teaching

Compare this painting to the portrait of Princess Leonilla. What is your first impression of the woman represented here?

Focus only on the woman's posture—what story does it tell?

Notice the amount of space around the figure. How does the space add to the overall mood of the character? How is the space here different than that in the portrait of Princess Leonilla?

Look closely at the visible brush marks that make up this portrait. Find areas in the painting that are painted differently from one another.

Imagine a possible location and function for this painting at the turn of the nineteenth century, when it was created. Why would anyone want a portrait of a sick woman?

Background Information

Although the identity of the sitter is in debate, it is possible that the painting depicts a relative of Edgar Degas and was painted on a trip to visit family in New Orleans, Louisiana. Degas conveyed the sitter's character by capturing the melancholy to which she has succumbed. Posing with her head tilted and leaning against the back of her left hand, the woman appears weary. Her languorous expression and red-rimmed eyes, together with the limp right arm hanging at her side, suggest a physical or emotional illness, though nothing in the painting confirms the cause of her affliction. She is hidden beneath a brown robe and full white gown, which contributes to her ambiguous pose; it is unclear if she sits, stands, or leans. *The Convalescent* attests to Degas' interest in the world of women—their physical characteristics and surroundings and their complex emotional and psychological conditions.

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Unlike traditional nineteenth-century portraits, which were commissioned and usually left the artist's studio upon completion, this depiction of a woman remained in Degas' studio for at least fifteen years. The painting is unconventional in other ways as well; *The Convalescent* is more psychologically suggestive and spatially ambiguous than typical portraits of the time, such as Franz Xaver Winterhalter's official portrait, *Leonilla, Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn*. Degas' thick, unblended brushstrokes and flattened space bring the figure forward, conveying informality and intimacy.

About the Artist

Edgar Germaine 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 Germaine Hilaire Degas

Because he came from 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 under one of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' students 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 Hans Holbein. 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 posthumously cast in bronze.