



***Ballet Dancers Rehearsing* (p. 23), Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas**

Ballet Dancers Rehearsing

Page 23 from *An album of Pencil Sketches*
Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas
French, about 1877
Graphite, 9 3/4 x 13 in.
95.GD.35.12



Background Information

In the 1870s Edgar Degas became fascinated with ballet dancers, paying frequent visits to the classes where the Paris Opera's **ballet master** trained groups of young girls, the so-called **petits rats** (little rats). Here, seven young dancers fill the page with their **pliés**, lunges, and kicks. Often Degas did not even bother to sketch the girls' heads, focusing instead on their bodies' contortions and outstretched arms and legs. A flurry of lines captures their fluttering skirts and short, pulled-back hair.

The writer Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his journal in 1873:

Yesterday I spent the afternoon in the studio of a painter named Degas. After many attempts, many bearings being taken in every direction, he has fallen in love with the modern and, in the modern, he has cast his choice upon laundresses and dancers. . . . And right before us, seized upon the spot, is the graceful twisting of movements and gestures of the little monkey-girls. . . . He is the man I have seen up to now who has best captured, in reproducing modern life, the soul of this life.

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

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of painting was a question of conventions, and that it was by far the best thing to learn drawing from the works of 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.

Ballet Dancers Rehearsing (p. 23), Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas**Questions for Teaching**

Take the time to look closely at the drawing. Describe what you see.

Where do you see evidence of motion? What makes you say that?

What motion do you see in the top right corner of the sheet? (*swaying of the hips*)

How do you know? (*gesture; expressive, energized marks*)

What parts of these two dancers were included in the sketch? (*legs, hips, arms*) What part of the dancers was excluded? (*head*)

What might the artist be interested in capturing with this sketch? (*motion and gesture*)

Which figure has the most details and definition of form? (*the standing figure on the left*)

Describe her gesture. What might she be thinking? Have you ever assumed this pose?