

Waiting, Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas

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Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas
French, about 1882
Pastel on paper, 19 x 24 in.
83.GG.219

Owned jointly with the Norton Simon
Art Foundation, Pasadena

Background Information

In this pastel, a young ballet dancer bends forward to massage her ankle, while her somberly dressed older companion sits silently beside her on a bench. They appear to be waiting, perhaps for an audition or its outcome. The two figures are a study in

contrasts: the athletic dancer dressed in a dazzling costume reflects the glamour and artifice of the stage, while the shabbily dressed, bent figure represents the drabness of everyday life.

Edgar Degas painted modern life; his subjects, including laundresses, milliners, nightclub singers, horse races, and the ballet, reflected contemporary Parisian occupations and diversions. From the 1860s onward, Degas frequented the Paris Opera, where he made numerous studies of performances, rehearsals, and backstage scenes. Later, he would refine and combine these **motifs** in his studio, in exercises of daring technical skill and compelling psychological subtlety. Here he demonstrated his complete mastery of the pastel technique. Delicately blended strokes are combined with bold hatching and emphatic slashes; pink, blue, and creamy **tones** describe the dancer in contrast to the dark, severe form of the older woman.

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



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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.

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at this work of art. Describe what you see.

Describe the two characters in this work of art. How are they different?

Focus on the posture and gesture of each figure. Notice what each is doing with her body (posture), hands (gesture), and head. When someone is seated in this way, how do you think the person feels?

Is there anything in the pastel that indicates the fact that this image was made well over a hundred years ago? (*the clothing of the dancer's companion*) What gives you that impression? (*her hat and parasol*)

What other details do you notice about these figures? (*the hairstyles and accessories*)

What has the artist chosen to conceal and reveal about these figures? (*their facial expressions*)

Why would you imagine the ballerina has her right hand on her ankle? (*She may have injured it.*)

What is happening in the drawing? (*The two women are sharing an anxious moment in silence.*)

What can you tell about the setting? (*They are seated on a bench. They may be outside of a rehearsal space.*)

How much of the composition is taken up with the figures? (*about one-third*)

What is the effect of the artist's use of space? (*The ballerina and figure in black are pushed into the top half of the composition. The diagonal space under their feet creates space for the viewer to enter the scene. The composition further isolates the figures, who are lost in their own thoughts and experiencing an anxious, personal moment.*)

Identify areas with crisp, unblended lines. (*edge of clothing, characters' bodies*)

Identify areas with layered, hatched, or parallel crossing lines. (*ribbons, skirt, hair, skin*)

How does this image differ from what we have observed from the sketchbook pages? (*resting vs. motion, finished pastel vs. quick sketch from memory*)