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ROMANCING THE DANCE

A ballerina's view
of Edgar Degas.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH DEGAS?

A dancer's view of the master's ballet classics.



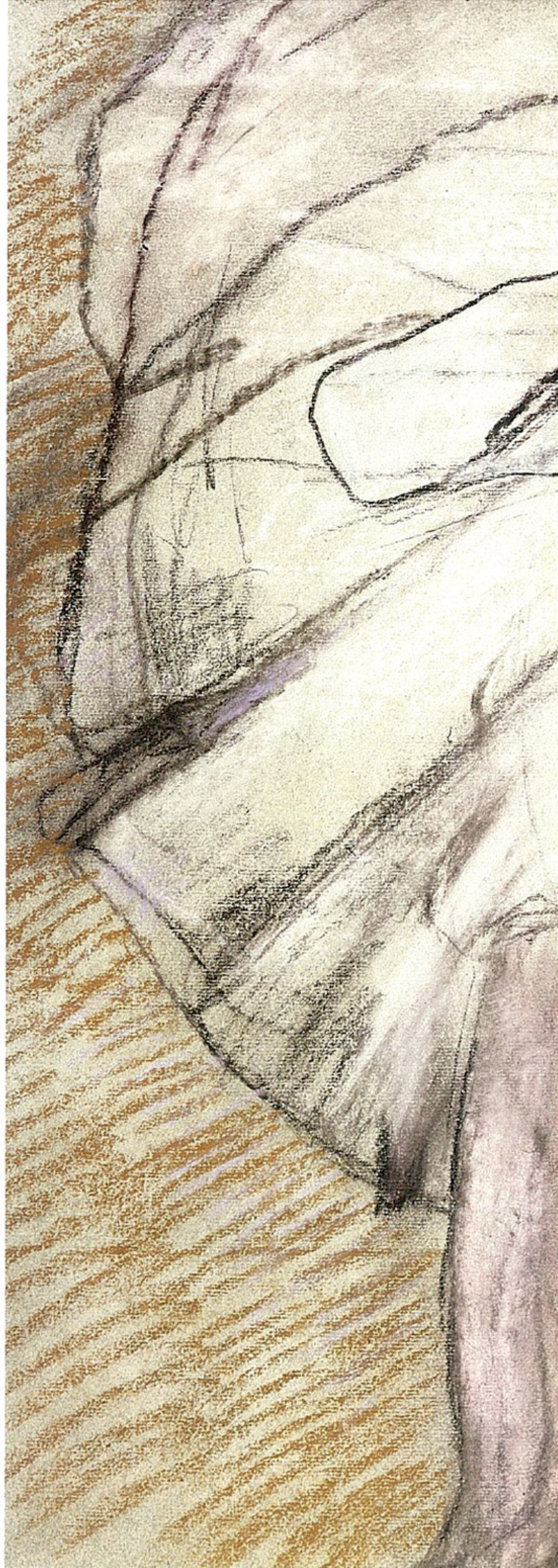
By Toni Bentley

As a little girl studying ballet, I was given books of reproductions of Degas's dancers and taken to see the paintings hanging in museums. It was a kind and natural association for parents and friends: "Look—this is what *you* do!" they would say. But... that was *not* what I was doing. And it was certainly not what I intended to do. Little ballerinas' egos are both serious and fragile; their vision extends, of necessity, only as far as their newly discovered limbs. There was no association between the paintings and our lives. Taken literally, Degas was wrong.

First there were the details. We never wore such glamorous practice clothes of satin and tulle for class or rehearsal. We wore leotards, tights, and legwarmers. His girls were round and pretty; we were linear and muscular, and pretty to us meant pretty boring and implied that the primary intent of our craft was merely the embodiment of feminine charms. The loose, decorative hairstyles of Degas's ballerinas presupposed slow, careful motion, whereas we were called

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The author as a "Degas dancer" in the ballet Tricolore (above, at left). Degas was actually at his best when he depicted dancers not dancing, as in this sketch of a ballerina adjusting her pointe-shoe ribbon.





"bunheads" because of our slick, tightly wound hair—necessary for the quick movements and turns required. And our movement was more turned-out (the outward rotation of the hips, legs, and feet upon which classical dance is based), flexible, precise, and stable than the precarious positions suggested by Degas's dancers. (This criticism was based on a much-loved image of our own abilities, an image yet to be made visible to anyone else.) In fact, many of his dancers remained upright not because they could have in positions that were not always classically correct, but because Degas gave them the support of his artistic license. Here was the indisputable problem: his ballerinas posed in two dimensions, we moved in three.

Then there was the presence of mothers or nannies actually fussing over their darlings in the classroom—a situation no ballet master or mistress in our experience would have tolerated. That there is not a male dancer to be found in Degas's work was an approximate truth of his times now vastly altered. In short, a certain resentment grew: what we did was difficult, disciplined, physical work that required the utmost self-mastery; it had absolutely nothing to do with paintings of girls in tutus from the Paris Opéra Ballet.

The representation of a craft in any medium other than its own is rightfully suspect. Igor Stravinsky held that music can represent nothing but itself and George Balanchine was adamant: "Gertrude Stein was right. A rose is a rose. A dance is a dance." Ballet is an especially tempting subject for interpretation in paint, clay, and celluloid, and is often the victim of romanticized sentiment, portrayed as static, gauzy, tragic, sentimental, spiritual, or, worse, as a world of provocative sexual innocence. Initial mistrust of Degas was justified—but could not have been more wrong. Degas



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had not misrepresented the world of the ballet. That some of his dance pictures have become clichés due to overexposure is not the fault of the artist. (On the other hand, the "publicity" factor of Degas's dance paintings has been consistent for over a hundred years, and has been of immeasurable value to an art not always taken seriously.)

I grew up and found myself as a professional dancer dressed as a "Degas dancer" in a ballet called *Tricolore*, conceived in 1978 for the New York City Ballet by Balanchine as a tribute to France. The central section, "Pas Degas," had the principal ballerina and twelve corps girls in curly wigs and the black neck ribbons and long tulle tutus that Degas immor-

talized (though the ribbons and colorful sashes in the paintings were, according to contemporary testimony, not true to fact but rather flattering additions made by the painter). The six boys in the ballet were dressed as "Degas jockeys." Unlike the paintings that partially inspired it, the ballet hardly survived its premiere, but that had nothing to do with Degas. We had looked and felt beautiful, surely one of the artist's intents.

Degas painted subjects in long series: women bathing, women combing their hair, women ironing, women singing, women dancing, and horses racing. It would appear that his interest lay in women, in women *doing*, but this was not apparently his deeper concern. (A bachelor all his eighty-three years, Degas seems to have been sexually abstinent, giving the lie to the idea that he "liked ballet girls.") The clue is in his attraction to horse racing—movement at its extreme—like ballet. "People call me the painter of dancing girls," he said. "It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement and painting pretty clothes."

Degas was not the first to compare dancers and horses. "A horse walks on its toes," wrote Paul Valéry, "Four hoofs, like toenails, support it. No animal is closer to a *première danseuse*, a star of the *corps de ballet*, than a perfectly balanced thoroughbred." Even Fred Astaire, married to a jockey, had a lifelong fascination with horse racing. Balanchine spoke of his dancers with great affection: "You know they are just like race horses and I am a veterinarian. I have to take care so they win the race." In Saratoga Springs, New York, the New York City Ballet has a season immediately preceding the August races. Balanchine loved this juxtaposition of equally skillful bodies, and even insisted that curtain time be announced by the post-time horn call used at the racetrack. (For-

The loose hairstyles worn by Degas's ballerinas in On the Stage (right) are rarely seen today, nor are doting mothers, as in The Mante Family (above), tolerated by ballet masters any longer.





tunately he did not suggest that the dancers parade in the paddock before performances, and there was definitely no betting on favorites.) Those who find the comparison of horses and dancers insulting may never have witnessed the beauty of a thoroughbred or the pride of a dancer in perfectly executed movement.

Dancers—and dance—in Degas's day differed from ballet today. Born in Paris in 1834, Degas was a child during the reign at the Opéra of the first ballerinas to dance on the tips of their toes with the support of specially designed shoes. Pointe dancing was the single greatest and strangest technical innovation since the basic five positions had been codified a hundred years earlier: it irrevocably altered the art form by allowing ballerinas to enter a world of movement completely their own. The great ballets of the romantic period, *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, established the image of a ballerina as an unearthly, elusive, ethereal creature impervious to the laws of gravity.

But more often than not Degas's dancers have their feet securely on the ground, literally and spiritually. By the 1870s, when he began to sketch and paint dancers, the great romantic ballerinas who had become celebrities earlier in the century—Taglioni, Elssler, Grisi, Cerrito, Grahn—had all retired from the stage. The glory of the romantic era was over, and the sylph was temporarily in eclipse. Ballerinas were shorter, wider, and more turned-in than they are today. Dancing was considered a slightly disreputable profession, a notion underscored by backstage liaisons between wealthy men and young dancers, often arranged



For every figure executing steps there are ten who are waiting—rubbing an ankle, stretching a leg, adjusting a costume, sitting, resting, fixing a hairdo.

by the girls' mothers. The center of ballet had gravitated from Paris to St. Petersburg in the latter part of the century, and Russian ballet remained preeminent until Diaghilev's Ballet Russe burst on the European scene in 1909 (Degas was still there to see them). Degas painted his dance pictures during a rather decadent slough in French ballet history; creative juices and great dancers had been in short supply. Degas painted very few recognizable personalities perhaps because there were few; more likely because he was simply not interested in preserving the famous. Assembling his works in the privacy of his studio, using memory and sketches he made at the Opéra, he often used a figure numerous times—for her position, not for her face. Except for a few notable exceptions, Degas's dancing scenes are entirely nonspecific—the rehearsal rooms are fabrications loosely based on fact, the performance paintings are of fictional ballets, and, most importantly, the dancers are typical, nameless. Degas thereby made a profound and still revolutionary

statement about dance: it is first and foremost about dancing, not individuals.

Degas attempted a greater truth than accurate specifics could report. His dance scenes convey an entire world, the one dancers inhabit—unique, specialized, insulated, and dedicated to the perfection of an ideal. That this ideal was a classical one was not incidental; it corresponded to Degas's attitude and belief about painting. When asked why he chose to paint the ballet he replied, "Because, Madame, it is all that is left us of the combined movement of the Greeks." He

abhorred being grouped with his contemporaries, the "impressionists," who believed in rejecting the past, recording only their visual response of the moment. Degas studied his craft as ballet dancers study theirs—learning the teachings of the great masters, exercising a perpetual repetition of the skills. "The same subject," he said, "must be done ten times, a hundred times over."

Dancers mold space with their bodies; Degas was able, magically, to translate this full-blown plasticity onto a flat surface. He used techniques that create illusions of perspective and depth that parallel the techniques a dancer uses for creating illusions of space with physical movement. By cutting off dancers or objects at the edge of the frame and rarely centering the action he displayed what the spectator would actually see at a given moment of time from an indirect angle. While this technique gives a certain photographic realism to the paintings, it also implies a crucial "before" and "after" to the moment recorded—something a

continued on page 126

In The Dance Examination (left) and L'attente (above) Degas captured an unchanging truth of the dancer's existence: her subtle, often introspective demeanor, and the awkward, sometimes graceful sense of presence a ballerina possesses.

Linda Plotkin

New Paintings

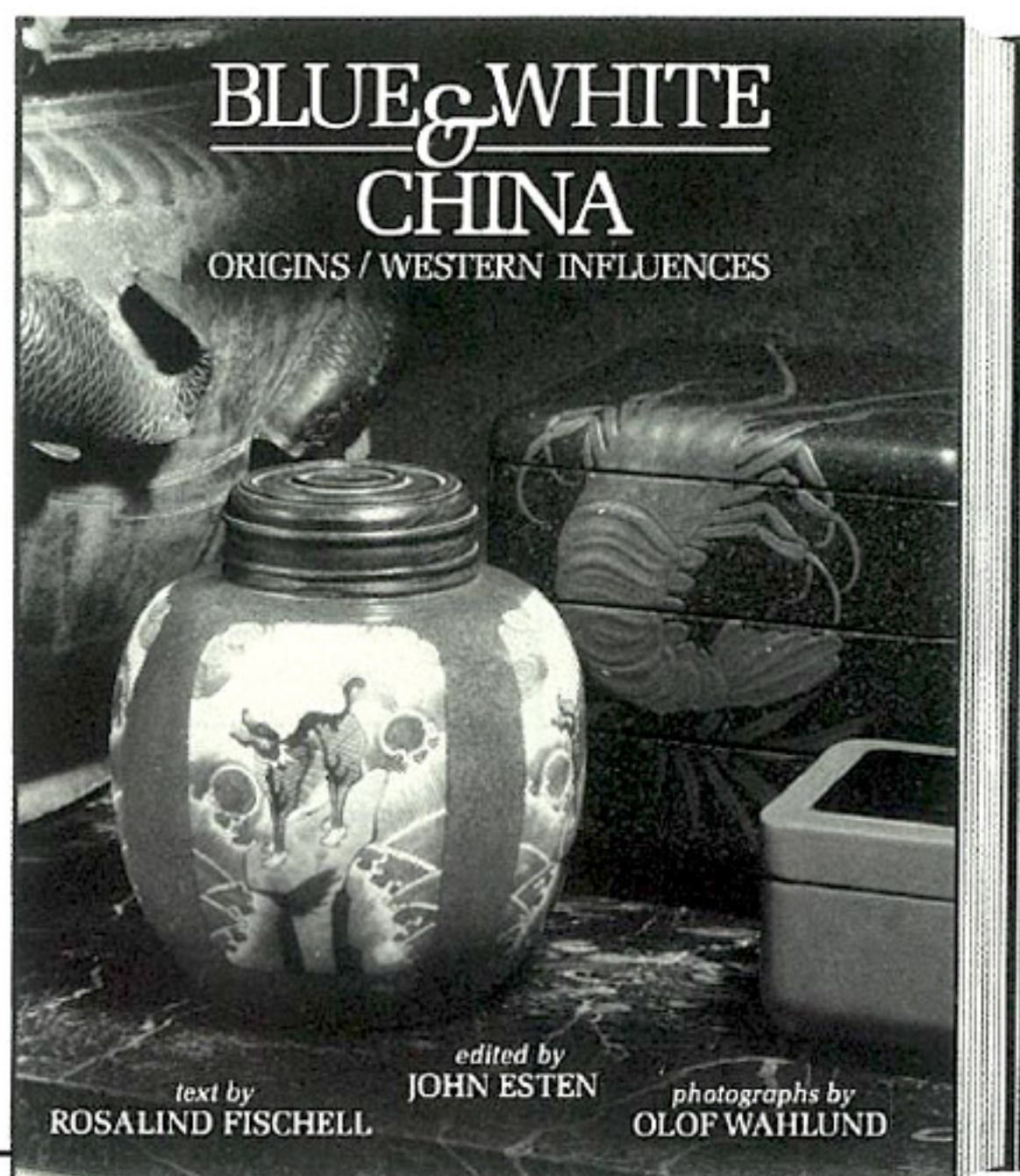


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DEGAS

continued from page 75 spectator at a live ballet understands unconsciously; it is what builds momentum, expectation, excitement. In fact, Degas did nothing to romanticize ballet: what is beautiful in his paintings is what is beautiful in ballet, not only on the surface, but deeper, in the magic of motion.

But Degas's genius, ironically, was best manifested in his depictions of dancers *not* dancing. For every figure actually portrayed executing steps there are ten who are waiting—tying a pointe-shoe ribbon, rubbing an ankle, stretching a leg, adjusting a costume, reading a newspaper, sitting, resting, fixing a hairdo. Their preoccupation with themselves reveals a certain disinterest, practical yet somehow sweet, in their peers and their surroundings. It is here that Degas captured with unerring truth a dancer's existence: for every minute of dancing, a dancer must spend countless others preparing. In these complex asymmetrical groupings of heads, limbs, and torsos ensconced in fluffy tutus, Degas shows a choreographer's fascination and calculation. Degas used paint and Balanchine used dancers, but in the work of both, bodies and costumes form shapes, angles, and silhouettes enhanced by artificial illumination.

Dancers who are not dancing differ from people who are not dancing; they remain imbued with an exaggerated physical consciousness. In motion or in stillness they retain a presence, often awkward, sometimes graceful. This acute self-awareness is a result of work begun in childhood and is never lost. It is composed of a certain pride, a self-possession, a quiet dignity. Degas's dancers carry on to the canvas this beautiful, subtle, often introspective demeanor, a demeanor that, unlike ballet technique and style, has not changed in the last hundred years.

Degas, with paints and pastels, could not show what dancers *do*—move in three dimensions in a time defined by music. It is cause enough for rejection by a young dancer who is defined more by ambition than experience. But experience proves Degas right: he showed what dancers *are*—creatures in pursuit of a craft. Happily, Degas used dancers as he used racehorses, as emblems of physical skill. In exploring his own art he honored the art of dancers. □