



“It is essential to do the same subject over and over again, ten times, a hundred times.”

Edgar Degas, *The Notebooks*

Imagine it: Degas made more than a thousand drawings, paintings, and sculptures of ballet themes. You can see some of them in the West Building, main floor gallery 89 and ground floor galleries 3 and 4.

Edgar Degas, *Ballet Dancers* (detail), c. 1877, pastel and gouache over monotype. National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

In the Wings
Edgar Degas, *Four Dancers*,
c. 1899, oil on canvas.
National Gallery of Art,
Chester Dale Collection



The Artist
Edgar Degas, *Self-Portrait*
(detail), probably 1857,
etching. National Gallery of
Art, Rosenwald Collection

1 The Artist at the Ballet

Edgar Degas (1834–1917) lived in Paris, France’s capital and largest city. In this vibrant center of art, music, and theater, Degas went to see the ballet as often as he could. At the Paris Opéra, he watched both performances and ballet classes, filling notebooks with sketches to help him remember details. Then, back in his studio, he’d use his sketches to compose paintings and model sculpture. In his numerous variations on the subject, we can see Degas’ penetrating observations of ballet life.

To learn more about Degas’ dancers, visit our Web site for this online tour:
<http://www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/degas/index.htm>

2 In the Wings

Four Dancers depicts the moment just before the curtain rises and a ballet performance begins. Red-orange costumes stand out against green painted scenery. Short, quick strokes of yellow and white paint on arms and tutus catch light and, along with squiggly black lines around the bodices, convey the dancers’ jitters and excitement as they await their cue to perform. **Here’s a mystery: Did Degas picture four dancers or four views of one dancer preparing to twirl onstage?** Some think it’s just one ballerina, pivoting in space, shown in the progression of the motion.

By cutting figures off at the edge of the picture, Degas made this image look like a snapshot from life. He wanted you to feel as though you were right there, backstage with the dancers. **Imagine that you twirl onstage with them. What do you think the audience will look like from the stage?**

3

In the Rehearsal Studio

Degas' many scenes of dancers in rehearsal focus on ballerinas absorbed in their daily routine. On this page, try to find dancers:

- **stretching**
- **adjusting their shoulder straps**
- **warming up at the barre**
- **pulling up their stockings**
- **resting**



Rehearsal Studio Edgar Degas, *Before the Ballet*, 1890/1892, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

4

A Dancer's Life

Dance students at the Opéra often came from working-class families. It was an exhausting life: young ballet corps members practiced steps all day and hoped to dance onstage in the evening. Few became star ballerinas.

Little Dancer Aged Fourteen is a sculpture of Marie van Goethem, a student who lived near Degas and posed for him in his studio. The daughter of a tailor and a laundress, she had two sisters who also studied ballet and posed for Degas. Three years after this sculpture was made, Marie was dismissed from the Opéra owing to poor attendance at ballet classes.

Degas' sculpture also ran into trouble. He had made the figure in wax, which he tinted in fleshlike tones and dressed in a miniature ballet costume, tiny slippers, and a wig tied low with a silk ribbon. People, fascinated and repelled by how lifelike it looked, debated whether it was art. Yet after Degas died, copies of this wax figure were cast in plaster and bronze, and *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* became world famous. Visit the West Building ground floor gallery 3 to compare Degas' wax sculpture (pictured here) with its plaster version.

Try to imitate Marie's pose. The slight sway in the lower back, arms clasped behind her, the upraised chin, and legs turned out indicate the casual fourth position, a stance that dancers assume when they are at ease.



A Dancer
Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* – wax statuette, 1879–1881, yellow wax, hair, ribbon, linen bodice, satin shoes, muslin tutu, wood base. National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

book nook

These books about Edgar Degas and ballet dancers can be found in the Children's Shop located on the Gallery's concourse level or at your local library or bookstore.

Angelina's Ballet Class

By Katherine Holabird,
illustrated by Catherine Kanner
Ages 4 and up

The exuberant mouse Angelina demonstrates first through fifth positions and such steps as the pirouette.

Bijou, Bonbon, & Beau: The Kittens Who Danced for Degas

By Joan Sweeney,
illustrated by Leslie Wu
Ages 4 and up

Three kittens living in a Parisian theater make mischief with the dancers.

Dancing in the Wings

By Debbie Allen,
illustrated by Kadir Nelson
Ages 6 and up

Watching from behind the curtain, Sassy hopes that one day she will become a star ballerina. Follow her up on her toes and into the spotlight.

Degas and the Dance

By Susan Goldman Rubín
Ages 8 and up

Go behind the scenes at the Paris Opéra, illustrated with more than thirty of Degas' works.

try this!

activity 1

Grand Arabesque

An *arabesque* is a position in which a dancer balances on one leg while extending the other leg back. At the same time, the dancer stretches his or her arms to provide balance. For Degas, the arabesque was the perfect gesture for exploring movement in space.

Pose like one of the arabesque sculptures pictured here and try to hold the position while you count to ten. How long did you last? Was it difficult? An arabesque requires a lot of balance.

Degas had to think about weight and balance when making his sculptures. He supported his sculptures with armatures, frameworks inside and sometimes outside a work that hold it in position.

Sketch an arabesque. Ask a friend to pose for you. Like Degas, you will have to sketch quickly! After you make the sketch, you can add a costume to the figure and a background.

above right: Edgar Degas, *Arabesque over the Right Leg, left Arm in Front*, c. 1882/1895, yellow-brown wax, metal frame. National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

right: Edgar Degas, *Grande Arabesque, Third Time (First Arabesque Penchée)*, c. 1882/1895, greenish-brown and black plâtrine. National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon



activity 2

Sculpt an Athlete

Degas continuously experimented with materials and techniques. He preferred sculpting the athletic figures of dancers with wax because he could model and rework it as much as he wanted.

Make a sculpture of your favorite athlete. First decide which athletes you enjoy watching most. In what position will you choose to portray your subject? Pay close attention to the position of the body. Does it twist, angle, stand straight, bend over, or reach up? If you'd like, find a photograph of an athlete to use as a reference.

Make a model, just as Degas did. You can use any type of clay or dough you wish. If you'd like to make your own dough at home, here's a simple recipe:

Ingredients:

2 cups water
2 cups flour
1 cup salt
2 Tbs. oil
2 tsp. cream of tartar
2 tsp. glycerin (optional, available at craft stores)
food coloring

Assembly:

Ask an adult to help you. First, combine all the ingredients in a large saucepan. Then cook the mixture over medium heat until the surface is dry. Once the surface is dry, knead the dough on a tabletop for four minutes. Make sure you store your dough in an airtight container.