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Hist of Mod & Contemp Art Rec
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Edgar Degas
the Dance Class, 1874

The light chattering from the painting of the 24 young ballerinas filled my ears, as I gazed at a fair distance. The rehearsal room was spacious, abandoned and the ballerinas were scattered about the room. Two girls stood in front of Degas' view, the largest figures due to his perspective, and practiced their pliés next to a piano and cello on the floor. All the girls seemed to be minding their own business, while a single ballerina danced in the middle of the room with her arms gracefully lifted in the air, as if she was a graceful swan spreading her delicate wings. She performed her hard worked dance for the instructor, who was holding a cane on the right side of the painting, watching her every movements like a hawk. Girls in the far back of the room sat on the rows of the bleachers against the wall and whispered to one another, while watching their fellow classmate dance in front of them, anxiously hoping she would finally get the dance right this time. Some girls chattered nonchalantly not paying attention to their classmate dancing, along with the mothers gossiping amongst themselves on the top row of the bleachers. A tall mirror on the left wall reflected some girls fixing their tutus in front of the mirror and it also reflected a large window, which was out of view in the actual painting. Through the reflection of the window, I could see the small top of buildings in Paris and a clear blue sky filled with fluffy clouds. Warm afternoon light gently poured in, caressing the skin of the swan-like ballerinas and danced around the room. I could imagine Degas, watching in admiration of the young ballerinas demeanors that ranged from a girl biting her nails out of anxiety to girls sitting cross-criss on the bleachers fidgeting with their bows. All seemed to create an environment of a cohesive, relaxed

imagery of a regular Tuesday afternoon at a ballet rehearsal in Paris. Through Degas, *the Dance Class* 1874, dated in Paris of 1834-1917, *Oil on Canvas*, his message seemed to highlight small, intimate and realistic depictions of moments he found intriguing, like his interest in the world of dance. Through this, he focused on the fluidity of movement and youthfulness of the dancers through his Impressionistic style. Degas, being part of the bourgeois class and having access to these rehearsals, also created social commentary that shed light on the hard-working ballet dancers of the lower class. This opened up a new lens for the bourgeois to be able to grasp the free-spirited, leisurely moment of one aspect of the lower class that Degas admired and wanted to share with the world.

This theme is conveyed through his subject matter, composition, space, and size of the painting. He witnessed a real moment of ballerinas in an abandoned empty rehearsal room, where he chose to portray them in the most accurate and realistic way to capture the whole beautiful essence of the temporary moment. Ballerinas, as the subject matter, communicated this sense of admiration he had for the art of the dance itself because they convey a strong imagery of youthfulness, grace, and innocence that helped push the free-spirited tone overall. He created visual hierarchy through the different poses expressed by the varying figures in the room from close up and far perspective, which expressed this fluidity of movement and dynamic across the painting, not only through the movement of the single dancer performing in the center of the painting, but through the range of space and



sizes. Some figures were cut off on the right hand side of the painting, hinting at the idea that the room spanned larger than what the painting depicted. The intention behind this was to create more of an intimate single moment of experience, emphasized by choosing to paint one area of the room. Another aspect that added to this was the actual size of the painting in the museum. It was not big nor too small; however, by having to go up close to see the details, it almost felt as if I was peering into this moment back in time, allowing myself to engage in my own private dialogue and conversation with the painting. Furthermore, the gaze painted from his own perspective gave this imagery a more personal attitude that alluded to the idea of appealing to the bourgeois in gaining insight to the life behind the curtains of lower class ballet dancers and enjoying the leisurely presence, as Degas did.

The use of pastel colors, Impressionist textural brushstrokes, and soft light and shadow imagery also helped convey the context behind the painting, as well. The use of muted complementary colors of browns, greens, bluish whites, light pinks and reds, and warm yellow tones came across as gentle and not excessively decorative, sticking to true perception of color. The bouncing of light further allowed the viewer to feel Degas' admiration of the dancers and soft atmosphere he characterized through light and color. He used oil paint on canvas to build thick, textural elements and short brushwork style that was reflective of the Impressionist movement, but he added a more realistic and rendered style. This related back to his purpose in painting the dancers in their purest forms and incorporating Impressionist elements of light, shadow, and texture to set a calm, relaxed tone that was communicated to the bourgeois to show what went on behind the grand ballet performances of the lower class ballerinas.

The goal of Impressionism was to capture these intimate, temporary moments of French lifestyle in a very loose way and to focus on light and natural environments. In response to the attitude that the Industrial Revolution diminished life's simple pleasures with technology, one could see his purpose in creating a naturalistic scene of ballerinas. However, Degas' painting had a lot more realistic aspects with definite figures and motion that seemed to, perhaps, reflect a different ideology that most Impressionist painters did not have, which could be that Degas thought the Impressionist movement created a disillusioned Utopia and he could achieve more out of it his message by creating concrete depictions of dance and the lifestyle of ballerinas that came across as more genuine. Like the political commentary depicted in Manet's *Olympia, 1863* and *Bar at the Folies*, Degas similarly created this dialogue of power and social class, through this imagery of lower class ballerinas in an abandoned rehearsal room, seen through his privileged eyes. This gave the lower class dancers more representation and a platform for the bourgeois to gain insight into this unfamiliar lifestyle, which could have impacted new conversation and the questioning of bourgeois' own identities.

The Dance Class 1874 captured dynamic of motion, displayed Degas' lighthearted appreciation for the theme of dance and ballerinas, and allowed for dialogue between social classes. Degas set the mood of placidity and gentleness through subject matter, composition, colors, light, texture, and space in a way that tied together to produce a strong understanding of his intentions. It allowed for a timeless dialogue with the audience and the painting, that not only focused on depicting a natural atmosphere influenced by Impressionist ideology, but also permitted the bourgeois to experience an intimate moment he felt in a little abandoned empty rehearsal room surrounded by the youthful grace and innocence of ballet dancers.