



***Ballet Dancers Rehearsing* (p. 25), Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas**

Ballet Dancers Rehearsing

Page 25 from *An album of Pencil Sketches*
Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas
French, about 1877
Graphite, 9 3/4 x 13 in.
95.GD.35.13

Background Information

Always captivated by gesture and motion, Edgar Degas in the 1870s became interested in ballet dancers, particularly in the youngest ballerinas of the **corps**. During frequent visits to the Paris Opera's ballet school, he found what interested him most: movement—not free and spontaneous action, but precise exercises. On this crowded sheet, one dancer practices at the bar in the upper left with her back toward the viewer, while two others with legs extended lean over on the right. It was the studied position of each girl's legs that fascinated the artist; he often did not even bother to finish the top half of the body (see, for example, the bottom left corner). In the bottom right corner, he quickly sketched a group of four dancers, their heads together, with the observant head of the **ballet master** just visible behind them.



Using quick, even careless strokes, Degas outlined the figures with abrupt lines as if he were impatient to record each woman's posture or hand movement in the most emphatic terms without sacrificing swiftness or spontaneity. He wasted no time giving depth to the forms with unnecessary shading or hatching; the finger he dragged over the tutu of the dancer at the top left created a smudgy shadow that simply suggests the garment's fabric.

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**

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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 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 the drawing. Describe what you see.

What does it look like these people are doing? (*practicing ballet*)

What do you see that makes you say that? (*They are stretching, pointing toes, leaning on the bar while extending their right legs.*)

What other details do you notice?

How many people are shown?

Describe the costumes that you see in the drawing. (*The dancers are wearing skirts, some with ribbons in the back, and their hair is in braids.*)

Where do you think they might be? (*ballet class*) What do you see in the drawing that makes you say so? (*the bar on which the dancers are practicing*)

What are the girls in the lower right of the page doing? (*One girl is checking the time while the others are huddled around her.*) What do their gestures communicate? (*They might be on a break.*)

Where do you see evidence of motion?

What makes you say that?

Identify the areas of the sketchbook page that show legs, feet, elbows, and hands in motion.

Describe what the artist has done to depict motion. (*He used line and redrew the position several times without erasing. He smudged the pencil lines and created several light parallel lines around the body parts to rearticulate the forms.*)