

The Tub, 1886

Pastel on card

60 × 83 cm

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The strong responses of contemporaries to the bathers can be judged by this passage from the art critic Félix Fénéon. It was published in 1886, the year this pastel was exhibited at the last independent exhibition. "Concerning M. Degas. Women squatting in their bathtubs fill them to the brim with their proliferating curves: one, whose chins reach her bosom, is scouring her neck. [...] It is in cramped space in dark, furnished hotel rooms, that these bodies, bruised by a rich patina of copulation, childbirth and illness, stretch their limbs or scrape their skin." It hardly seems that Degas is one to degrade the unclothed body, but rather critics, acting as guardians of public propriety and decorum, who are displaying intense distaste. Fénéon admits that "in M. Degas's work as in no other, human flesh lives an expressive life of its own"—although he probably did not mean it as a compliment.

The handle of the hairbrush and that of the coffee pot jutting over the edge of the table or shelf creates a sense of depth. Still-life painters from the Dutch Golden Age onwards used foreshortening and projection of objects to display their virtuosity and emphasise pictorial depth. In some cases it amounted to *trompe-l'œil*. The inclusion of the coffee pot, hairbrush, water jug, scissors and another item, that could be of cloth or fur, add a touch of verity. Significantly, Degas did not make still-lives, despite his evident competence. Like his heroes Jacques-Louis David and Ingres, Degas too found landscapes and still-lives exercised no hold over his imagination. Degas is the heir to those great masters of the past because he turned his favoured motif—the bathing woman—into a subject of iconic images combining grandeur and sensitivity in art that is both memorable and brilliantly executed. When one thinks of the female nude, one of the first images that comes to mind are pictures such as *The Tub*. The paintings of Bonnard directly extend Degas's bathers series with their domestic intimacy, chromatic complexity and compartmentalisation of picture surfaces. Bonnard's painting of a nude in a tub at the Royal Museum of Fine Art, Brussels, is a clear example of this.



Jockeys in the Rain, 1886

Pastel on tracing paper

47 × 65 cm

Burrell Collection, Glasgow

Horses and riders line up for a race in the rain. Degas rarely had a chance to experiment with weather effects that his landscape-painter colleagues so famously explored. Dashes of rain are pale blue; the turf is composed of scribbled light sage and slashes of pale blue over olive and greenish tan. The glossy coats of the horses are burnt umber and maroon, with bluish-grey highlights.

Degas collected props and costumes for his work, including a model horse, on which he could position riders in his studio. It allowed him to record the position and viewpoint of riders in a controlled environment. This explains why many preparatory drawings and painted sketches exist that are so detailed.

The support for the drawing is tracing paper or *papier calque*, a vegetable-fibre paper made transparent through resins and oils, which is used to make tracings. Degas not only used it to transfer designs but as the ground for completed drawings, a practice discouraged by expert advice. Expert pastelists recommend heavy, textured papers as the best supports because these surfaces offer most grip for pastel particles. Degas was evidently pleased by the feel of drawing on slippery tracing paper, something that outweighed the difficulty of building multiple layers of pastel on smooth paper. Another disadvantage of *papier calque* is that it ages rapidly, turning brown and brittle. Degas's drawings on tinted wood-and-cotton-pulp paper have also altered in appearance since he made them. Aniline dyes, discovered in 1856, that are used to colour paper are often impermanent; papers that were originally blue, green and pink have turned grey. This can be seen when picture mounts have been removed to reveal the original colours protected from ultraviolet rays. Some of Degas's paint and pastel pigments have also faded.



Female Nude Having her Hair Combed, c. 1886–88

Pastel on card

76 × 60.6 cm

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

This is one of the most complete and approachable of Degas's later nudes. There is no acrobatic pose, no obscured face, no truncated limbs. The completely accurate anatomical proportions underline Degas's confident handling of the subject. His great experience in portraying the unclothed body came from years of specialisation, and the regular work with nude models meant that he became an expert in depicting skin, hair and the various aspects of the figure that less consummate artists summarise. Artists develop their skills in depicting foliage, silks, flowers, animal pelts and the lustre of fruit. The more skill they accrue, the more they wish to outdo themselves. They also sharpen their perceptiveness. It clearly did not escape Degas's attention the way the model's thumb pressed into the swell of her flank, mimicking the way buttons secure upholstery on the chaise longue upon which she is seated.

By cropping the head and shoulders of the maid, and drawing her blouse as tonally indistinguishable from the background, the artist leads us to consider the seated woman in isolation. Degas sometimes reversed such solutions. The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen houses the Degas pastel *Toilette after the Bath* (1888/9), where the subject is a maid holding up a towel; her mistress's figure is confined to a sliver at the side of the composition.

Although Degas was well known in his lifetime for his quick wit and cutting comments, he tended to be attentive and considerate towards models and servants. He had a good relationship with his housekeeper Zoé Closier and photographed himself with her.



In Front of the Mirror, 1889

Pastel on paper

49 × 64 cm

Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

This beautiful image is like a scene from a story by Gustave Flaubert or Guy de Maupassant. The woman fixes her hat with hat pins as light glances across her shoulders. Traditionally, pale skin was considered ladylike and aristocratic; tans were associated with country folk and labourers who had to work outdoors. There are essentially only three colours in this picture: cobalt blue, russet and white. The warm and cool colours balance and complement each other, with white tempering them.

In this picture, we get a glimpse of an ordinary life that will still be familiar to many, set in a time of widening horizons. Industrialisation and urbanisation made Paris the centre of the couture trade. Shops, department stores and arcades flourished as sites of desire for women seeking to express their taste and refinement through material consumption. Commercial production made luxury goods affordable. Advertising reached new levels of sophistication in newspapers and fashion journals; colour posters turned the city into a riotous explosion of artificial flowers, ready to be plucked by discerning ladies. Women's dress reform, property rights, financial independence and political enfranchisement were hotly debated. Women escaping drudgery and duty only to encounter new temptations in the city was the stuff of sensational stories of crime and divorce in the newspapers; it was also fodder for novelists. Art critics were forever debating the moral status of Degas's women, reflecting Parisian society's unease over the uncertain demarcations between extra-marital affairs, concubinage, transactional sex and prostitution.

Previously dated 1885/6, the latest expert consensus is that this pastel was created in 1889. The similarity of the objects on the dresser to those in *The Tub* (page 91) maybe suggested the earlier date. Dating Degas's work is often difficult as he rarely dated it and retained pictures for years before exhibiting or selling them.



Coastal Landscape, c. 1892

Pastel over monotype on tan paper

46 × 55 cm

Galerie Jan Krugier, Geneva

In November 1892 Degas held a rare solo exhibition at Paul Durand-Ruel's gallery. What was even more notable was that this master of the figure was displaying monotypes of landscapes. This was an oddity because, as acquaintances noted, Degas was critical of contemporary landscape painting. He made small landscape sketches in oil on paper of sights in Italy during his youth, but rarely afterwards. The prints were in colour and often close to abstraction, with the landscape reduced to blurred and speckled bands of pasture and hill, some with distant chimneys issuing smoke. Some prints were retouched with pastel.

In this picture, a monotype has been completely covered by a pastel. Reading from left to right, we see steep slopes of raised thighs descending to the gentle swell of a belly and then conical breasts; finally, the vertical cliff of sandstone is the long russet a woman's hair tumbling down. It is a tactile work, inviting us to conflate the familiar shape of a woman's body and the texture of turf and sandstone. We can think of this picture as not only a classic example of anthropomorphism, where the non-human is given attributes of a person, but also a form of synesthesia, when the mind confuses sensory inputs. We experience the sensation of touch whilst only looking.

This picture is a riposte to landscape painters, maybe to Monet in particular, whom Degas considered a rival. Degas disdained *plein-air* painters, jesting that they should be driven away by gendarmes. In this picture, Degas was teasing landscapists by entering their territory and subverting it by making a landscape out of the human form. Not least, he was doing it indoors because monotypes must be made in the studio in proximity to an etching press. Wittily, Degas was suggesting in this picture that the nude was a branch of art so flexible and compelling that it could be whatever a gifted artist wanted it to be.



Breakfast after the Bath, c. 1895

Pastel on paper

121 × 92 cm

Private collection

Degas returned to this subject many times over his last decades. This version is the most fully realised and rich in colour. The nude woman and her clothed attendant is a subject that goes back to antiquity and was a particular favourite of painters from the Renaissance, Baroque and Rococco periods. Manet reprised the combination in his *Olympia* (page 15), which itself was taken from two paintings of Venus by Giorgione and Titian.

Domestic servants were very common until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. Going into domestic service was a slightly preferable occupation to factory work, the garment trade and other menial jobs. The presence of the servant does not necessarily indicate that the bathing woman is of anything higher than modest status. This scene might depict one of the numerous actresses and singers in Paris who lived in apartments paid for by their lovers. It is possible that Degas had in mind one of the many contemporary novels that feature mistresses or concubines. We cannot pin down instances of Degas using literature as a source. We know that he read widely and was friends with authors but he did not provide narrative titles to "explain" pictures; in this respect, he was like the other Impressionists. Note the high vantage point. This almost certainly comes about through the placement of the motifs rather than Degas working from life with two models. The scene has been built on the sheet with independent motifs rather than arranged with models posed in the studio together. The high vantage point is characteristic of Japanese prints.



The Morning Bath, c. 1895

Pastel on paper

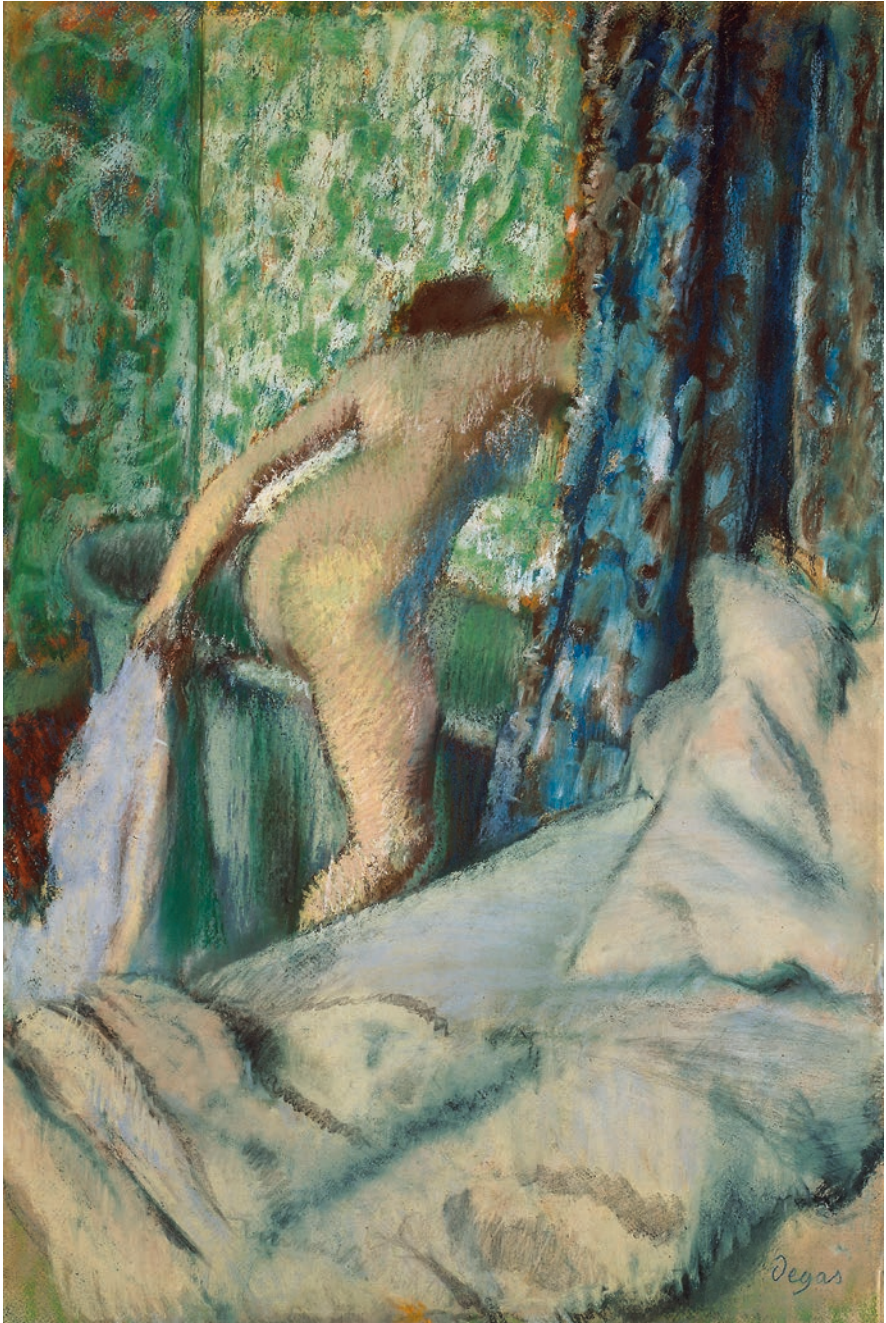
66.8 × 45 cm

Art Institute of Chicago

It is rare that the title of the picture comes directly from the artist himself. But here it does. Degas did not pay much attention to titles and most of his art was titled by cataloguers after his death in bare descriptive terms. The narrative can be easily understood. A woman enters a bath; in the foreground is an unmade bed and the bedroom is filled with cool morning light.

The bather, in this beautiful and chromatically cool pastel, is in a dynamic pose. The harmonies of aqueous hues of blue and green are heightened by the pale pink of the body. The blue light reflected from the curtain is caught on the woman's hip, flank and breast; touches of reflected green from the wallpaper appear on the left arm, the back and other parts. The capacity of pale skin over subcutaneous fat to catch reflected light transforms the expressiveness of the nude figure. Artists such as Rubens and Delacroix used reflected light and brushstrokes of contrasting colours to engender vigour and excitement to painting of unclothed flesh.

Many artists have been excited by the drama and tragedy of fragments of ancient statues. Degas spent many hours copying antiquities in Italy in his youth and visited the Louvre all his life. In his mature art, Degas found a way to capture a certain movement or shape by reducing the human figure. We often encounter limbs obscured, heads lowered, faces averted, bodies reduced to a sliver by the edge of a screen. The plastic potential of the body was also explored by Auguste Rodin in this era through his removal of limbs and heads from some of his realistic statues, turning them into strangely powerful primitive avatars. Rodin literally sawed off parts of plaster casts, whereas Degas used screens, curtains, furniture and towels—as well as the position of the body itself—to conceal parts of the figure. The artists shared similar interests but used different approaches to achieve the same goal. In his reduced human forms, Degas shows us the body in a startlingly fresh way, filling us with wonder.



Combing the Hair (La Coiffure), c. 1896

Oil on canvas

124 × 150 cm

National Gallery, London

In the late 1890s, colour became increasingly important to Degas. As his eyesight deteriorated, he became incapable of the delicate shading and observation of detail that was characteristic of his early production. He sought ever stronger colours and more striking contrasts. In this painting, a fiery brick-red suffuses the whole painting surface. Unlike other earlier pictures by Degas, there is no cool colour to balance it. The picture plane is shallow; we have no way of judging the dimensions of the room these figures occupy. Modelling of space and figures, detail and individual identities of the figures are unimportant. We do not read this paint, we experience it.

When Degas was young, he emulated Renaissance and Neoclassical artists. In Rome, Gustave Moreau introduced Degas to the power of Delacroix's Romanticism in 1858/9. Here Degas abandons himself to the sensuousness and emotionality of Romanticism. Is this a hint of his experience of Tangier in 1889? There are no other discernible traces of this journey in Degas's art.

Combing the Hair (La Coiffure) became a touchstone for artists of the following generations, especially Henri Matisse (1869–1954), whose *The Dessert: Harmony in Red* (1908) and *Red Studio* (1911) use motifs against a strong red background. Matisse was actually studying under Moreau when Degas was painting *Combing the Hair*. Degas's decision to pare down everything to its essence, and use the power of colour as the primary means of directing the viewer's experience, was an inspiration for Modernists of the following century, including the Fauve painters, Robert Delauney, Wassily Kandinsky, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and others.



Blue Dancers, c. 1898

Pastel on paper

60 × 67 cm

Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

The dim overhead lighting is what we would expect to see when observing dancers in the wings of the stage or waiting behind a curtain. It was also lighting identical to that in Degas's studio. Degas took a number of photographs of a dancer in stage costume under a skylight, which he drew repeatedly before composing this pastel, including multiple poses of the same model. Degas used to say "Make a drawing, begin it again, trace it; begin it again, and trace it again." Source photographs for this pastel exist. This is effectively a multiple-time-lapse photograph brought to life through colour and touch. Degas has drenched the picture in scintillating pale blue, violet and green enlivened by touches of ochre. The pale skins are suffused with the blue light that is reflecting off their dresses.

In the last pastels and paintings, Degas detached himself from Realism and became increasingly attached to the nude and the dancer isolated from their settings and from any literal narrative. Settings became less specific, more generalised. He submerges the subject and the viewer in a sumptuous play of colour and pattern. The last pictures are practically airless. The picture plane becomes so shallow it is almost flat and we cannot separate figure from background; bodices and tutus dissolve into scenery. There is a noticeable shift from the 1870s, when dancing was an activity to be performed in a crowded studio or on the stage, in the presence of an audience, to the 1890s, when dancers become detached from viewers and surroundings. Even though the subjects and motifs remained constant, Degas's social isolation in his last decades seems reflected in the content of his art.



Russian Dancers, c. 1899

Pastel on paper

45 × 67 cm

Private collection, Canada

Commonly described as Russian, the costumes of these dancers have recently been identified as Ukrainian. The flowers are also typical of Ukrainian (not Russian) national folk custom. These Ukrainians must have resigned themselves to being misidentified due to a general ignorance about their nation. The heaviness and looseness of the clothing is the polar opposite of the minimal specialised costumes of French ballet. The earthiness of figures, distinctive clothing and variety in dance steps (and music) must have added to their appeal for the artist.

Julie Manet, daughter of Berthe Morisot, niece of Manet, described visiting Degas in July 1899. Degas commented on "orgies of colour that I am making at the moment" and showed her his series of "Russian" dancer pictures. The eruption of very strong colours has been closely associated to Degas's failing eyesight.

Quite how badly his vision was fading is unclear. Some close to him noted that he never became entirely blind and in 1914 he visited an exhibition of Cassatt's art.

Art critics have detected elements common to the late styles of artists who reach old age: loose handling, strong colour, simplified forms, reduced modelling, more abstract approach to composition. The old-age style has been characterised as a freeing of inhibition, greater confidence, pursuit of artistic freedom and independence from expectations of critics and collectors. Potential physiological causes that have been given include deteriorating eyesight (including short sightedness and cataracts), manual tremor, arthritis, loss of dexterity and lessening of stamina. Artists considered to have had a late style include Titian, Monet, Rembrandt, Picasso, Renoir and Degas. Although we should not draw too close a correlation between art and physical ailments, it is undoubted that Degas's failing eyesight contributed to his late style, with its heavily worked contours, strong colours, planar qualities and diminished detail.

Just as the visit of Cambodian dancers to Paris in 1906 inspired an elderly Rodin to create a group of unique watercolours, so these Ukrainian dancers prompted Degas—master of Parisian ballet art—to achieve works of new intensity just as his capacities were faltering.

