

# ***Exploration of the Female Ballerinas Image in Edgar Degas' Works: the Star (L'Étoile)***

**Jiayi Wu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Shanghai Qibao Dwight High School, Shanghai, China*

*a. dao.sprefe@natains.org*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Edgar Degas' work on female ballerinas is one of his most famous subjects, and his paintings often cut through the gorgeous surface to show the viewer the difficulties and dark side behind the scene. Through a specific analysis of Degas' 1876 work the star, this research analyzes Degas' images of ballerinas in the context of the life of ballerinas in 19th century Paris and Degas' painting career. Possible inner meanings are suggested, including the ballerinas' realization of self-worth, as well as escape the reality and the projection of Degas' inner thoughts. It is argued that the female ballerinas in his paintings expressed his ambition in the pursuit of art. Degas' characterization in front of and behind the scenes is likewise a confirmation of self-worth. It is argued that the new feminist-oriented art historical research needs the inspiration from Degas, with his fusion of both the identities of a feminism thinker and an artist.

**Keywords:** Edgar Degas, Ballet, Ballerinas.

## **1. Introduction**

Founded in 1669, the Paris Opera Ballet was the world's first professional ballet company, responsible for teaching and training ballerinas and staging high-quality ballets at the Paris Opera House, not only presenting ballet, many famous ballets were created in the Paris Opera Ballet. In the first half of the 19th century, early classical ballets, such as Giselle (1841) and La Sylphide (1832), were created during the Romantic movement in the Paris Opera Ballet and were performed in large numbers to audiences [1]. In both ballets, the main female roles were portrayed as fragile and beautiful nymph forms, their characteristics were usually shaped as faithful women. Such character designs met the audience's expectations of a perfect female figure, but in the Paris Opera at the time, those ballerinas were given a life that was completely different from the one they interpreted in the ballets, they don't have a neat place to live, pure love, or a respectable social status.

Contemporary ballet is often considered a refined art, children who study ballet often have privileged family backgrounds, and ballet training is not seen as a job that provides financial resources for the family, but rather as a tool to enhance one's temperament. When we mention ballerinas now, we associate them with wealthy, happy girls. However, contrary to our current common sense, the ballerinas who trained in the Paris Opera were not the children of wealthy families that lived in central Paris. Instead, many were the children of working-class people who lived on the fringes of the Parisian city. The girls often joined the opera as ballerinas at a young age

and trained hard every day to get on stage as soon as possible. Their purpose in becoming ballerina was to become a source of finance and support their families [2].

The 19th-century French novelist Edmond Huot de Goncourt gave the girls in the Paris Opera House the name Les Petit's rats, which on the one hand described the girls' lithe leaps and bounds, and on the other hand, described the poverty of their families and their thin bodies caused by excessive practice and hunger.

In their daily practice and classes, these young ballerinas were taught not only dance techniques but were also indoctrinated into the idea of the sex trade. "My good friends, be charming, sensual, indicate through movement the greatest transports of passion. It is imperative that during and after your variations you inspire love and the box and orchestra and seat holders should want to carry you off to bed "[3]. So said Auguste Vestris to the ballerinas, he was a famous French ballet dancer as well as a teacher.

The reason for transmitting such ideas to the ballerinas was a defaulted phenomenon: Within the opera houses of that time, there was a group of people who offered financial support to ballerinas in exchange for their sexual needs, the Abonnés.

## **2. Abonnés and the Foyer De La Danse**

Abonnés were groups of wealthy men who acted as patrons for ballerinas, usually from the Jockey Club de Paris, they had memberships to the Paris Opera and were allowed to stay anywhere in the opera house to seek sexual favors from ballerinas [4]. In 1892, Scribner's Magazine compares the ballet company to a bar in a large hotel, where guests pay a fee in exchange for the services they need.

In the opera house, the trade between ballerinas and Abonnés often took place in the foyer de la danse, a hall behind the stage of the opera house that served as a rehearsal room and lounge for the ballerinas, they often stayed in this room before the ballet started, or during the intermission. However, the foyer de la danse did not perform the function it was supposed to do, Abonnés was allowed to enter the foyer de la danse and have access to these ballerinas at any time.

Abonnés did not only look for ballerinas by themselves, in most cases, but the girl's mother also acts as an agent between the ballerina and her Abonné. For many ballerinas whose families are not endowed, establishing a relationship with Abonné makes it possible to maintain their financial situation, or even obtain a radical change in their lives [5].

In addition to these Abonnés deal sexually with ballet dancers. Among the patrons in the opera house, there were also groups of people who were genuinely interested in ballet and would pay the amount of the course for talented ballerinas for their training and technical improvement. However, such patronage was usually seen as a financial investment, not a generous sponsorship. When the invested ballerina achieves a successful career, the patron receives not only the money back but also a boost in fame and status in social circles.

In any case, in the eyes of these patrons, ballerinas were objects, or commodities, disposable items that can be easily discarded. But the ballerinas were often burdened with negative gossip, even if they excel in the company without any sponsorship.

## **3. Edgar Degas and his Paintings of Female Ballerinas**

### **3.1. Edgar Degas and Ballerinas**

Edgar Degas (July 19, 1834 - September 27, 1917) was a French painter. He was born into a wealthy family south of Montmartre, Paris, to a professional banker with a keen interest in art and an artist mother. In 1856, Degas went to Italy to study classical art and returned to Paris in 1859 [6].

Degas depicted many figures and scenes throughout his painting career; however, ballet was the most common subject in his paintings.

Degas' focus on ballerinas began in 1862 when he met Édouard Manet. Perhaps influenced by the style of Manet's paintings instead of concentrating on the classical art he had studied, Degas turned his attention to the various people of the Parisian metropolis, including ballerinas [7].

Through his social identity and the help of his friends, Degas was able to move freely through the Parisian opera houses. Rather than painting beautiful scenes of ballerinas dancing to music and lights on stage, Degas preferred to document the daily practice of ballet dancers. In his paintings, young ballerinas naturally adjust their costumes, stretch their bodies, receive instruction from their teachers, chat with their peers, rub their legs, and tie their shoes in the rehearsal room. Degas was like a documentary filmmaker, documenting the daily life of these ballerinas living in the Paris Opera with a non-superior perspective.

### 3.2. Pastel Painting Technique

Degas created around 1500 works of ballerinas during his lifetime, among all techniques used in the paintings, his use of pastels has received a great deal of attention. More than just pastels, he used a technique called "monotype", which was a bit like a combination of pastels and printings. He used black ink to draw the general outline on a copper plate and then used pastels to color inside the already fixed outline. In addition to "monotype", Degas sometimes used "fixative" in his paintings. Because pastels were so light, it was difficult to superimpose multiple layers of color, so Degas used "fixative" to hold the underlying color in place and then continued to add new colors with pastels, the use of "fixative" allowed his images to show a strong overall feel, but the flowing skirts of the dancers were not affected. Notice that the ballerinas' skirts are not usually pure white - blue, yellow, and gray are added to the white to bring out the layers of cloth in the skirt, the use of "fixative" made this interpretation more obvious and created the fluffy tutus in Degas' works.

## 4. The Star (L'Étoile)

The Star (L'Étoile) is a work by Edgar Degas from 1876. Around the time when this painting was created, Degas turned seriously to pastel painting, which then became his favorite painting medium. The Star (L'Étoile) was exhibited at the Third Impressionist Exhibition in 1877, along with another painting that also featured ballet as its subject. Today, the painting is kept in a collection in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France.

The Star (L'Étoile) is a representation of a 19th-century ballerina at work and is a typical example of Degas' portrayal of ballerinas on stage. The image of ballerinas under Degas' pen is represented from multiple perspectives in this painting, including the clothing, posture, composition, background, and details.

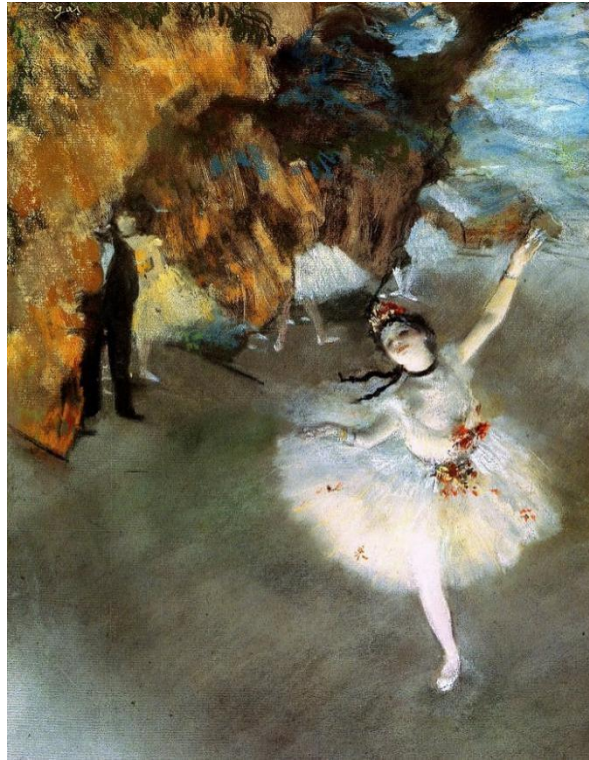


Figure 1: Degas, Edgar. L'Etoile. c. 1876. Pastel sur monotype. 58 cm × 42 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Accessed from <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr>.

#### 4.1. The Dancer's Wardrobe Indicates her Identity

The ballerina in the picture is wearing a ballet costume called a tutu. Tutu is the standard stage performance costume worn by female ballerinas, usually consisting of four or five layers of silk or nylon fringe; the skirt is attached to a smooth, fitted top. When the tutu was first designed in the 1830s for romantic ballet, its skirt extended to about 12 inches above the floor, almost covering the whole leg. However, it was not until the 1880s that the tutu's hemline was gradually shortened until the entire leg was visible [8].

The ballerina was fully armed, from the hair ornaments, the floral decorations around her waist, and the bracelets on her hands, we can see how well prepared she was for this ballet. Note the bracelets on her hands and the flowers decorated on her tutu, which often appear simultaneously on the ballerinas on stage in Degas' paintings, the ballerinas in *Two Dancers Entering the Stage* have almost the same decorations. So we can assume that these ballerinas wearing bracelets and flowers were dancers of a certain status in the company who had the opportunity to appear on stage.

In addition to pure white dresses and floral decorations, the ballerinas in Degas' paintings often wear other colors, such as the ballerina in a yellow tutu waiting in the upper left corner of the waiting area of the star, and ballet dancers in blue and green tutus in Degas' paintings of rehearsal spaces.



Figure 2: Degas, Edgar. Two Dancers Entering the Stage. c.1877 - c.1878. Pastel sur monotype. 31.8 cm × 35 cm. Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museums), Cambridge, MA, US. Accessed from <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edgar-degas/two-dancers-entering-the-stage>.

#### 4.2. Body Posture

The moment framed by Degas was almost like a photograph - the ballerina with one foot on the ground, hands stretched like wings, she looks like a fairy about to fly. Degas, like most Impressionists, painted from memory, using his fleeting memory of the stage to recreate the moment he saw.

In Degas' paintings, ballet dancers often tense themselves in training or relax in exhausted postures. In this painting, the ballet dancer presents her beauty to the audience in a stretched posture, testifying to her professionalism and her enjoyment of ballet.

At the same time, the ballerina holds her head up and closes her eyes, and her cheeks become red, showing a sense of satisfaction. We can't know what time of ballet Degas is depicting in this painting, perhaps it is the middle of a scene, or perhaps it is the scene where she finishes her dance to thank the audience. Under Degas' brush, she is proud and satisfied, and at this moment she is the star of the stage.

#### 4.3. Degas' Interpretation of Light

Unlike the natural light that other Impressionist painters promoted, Degas was more fascinated by the depiction of indoor light. In this painting, Degas' favorite form of stage lighting is used. The dancer's body is illuminated from the bottom up, and as she stands on tiptoe and her body leans, her entire tutu was bathed in light, making her shine throughout the painting. This bottom-up stage lighting also dimmed the scene behind her, thus accentuating her status as an important character in the ballet [9].

#### 4.4. Composition and Blurring of the Background

In this painting, to the left of the diagonal line, the stage waiting area was depicted as blurred, and we can see several dancers waiting to come on stage on the left, hidden behind a curtain, and a man



in a black suit. The stage decoration was replaced by blocks of color. Through this weakening of the background and the inconspicuous supporting characters, the depth of the image was reflected and the main character of the image is highlighted, echoing the title “the star”.

Along with the blurred background, there are brash lines. The curtain on the stage is furiously painted with dark blocks of color, and aggressive yellow is used extensively in the upper left corner of the picture to create a contrast with the almost pure white dancers [9].

Because Degas did not use standard diagonal composition, the left half of the background is visually in the upper left corner of the dancers. This aggressive feeling is not only reflected in the use of yellow color blocks, but the waiting postures of the ballerinas behind the curtain, these seem to foreshadow their appearance, the protagonist will no longer be the only star on the stage. She may be about to be eliminated, implying the short working life in a ballet company.

#### 4.5. The Man in the Black Suit

In the background of the scene, behind the curtain, there is a black figure. He appears to be an adult man, wearing a black suit and a bowler hat. To identify him, similar figures appear in several other Degas paintings depicting ballet dancers backstage were gathered. In *Danseuses (Les Coulisses de l'Opéra)*, a ballet dancer and a male in a black suit are on the right side of the picture, and by their intimate gestures, we can quickly identify the male as an *Abonné* - in this seemingly foyer de la danse, only *Abonnés* are allowed to come and go freely.

This dangerous black figure seems to suggest the sad situation of the ballerina - when this ballet ends and she steps down, she stops to be an independent ballerina and becomes the property of her *Abonné*. Degas uses suggestive metaphors to present the ballerina's encounter inside the opera house without any revealing scenes.

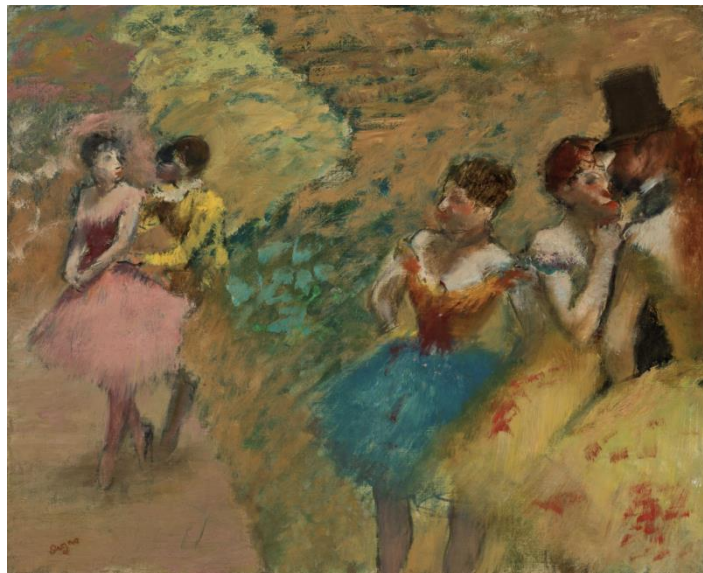


Figure 3: Degas, Edgar. *Danseuses (Les Coulisses de l'Opéra)*. c.1886. oil on canvas. 49.8 cm × 61.1 cm. Accessed from <https://www.edgar-degas.org/Danseuse.html>.

#### 4.6. The Escape from Reality and the Realization of Self-worth

Ballet girls are undoubtedly faced with the harsh social reality of sexual exploitation and short working life that leaves them living in a stifling theater. Yet, even in the face of such dark social realities, ballerinas, must have enjoyed their work. When wearing layers of dance dresses, with ornaments on their heads and ribbons around their waists; when lacing up their shoes and stepping

onto the stage with light jumps; when the stage lights come on instantly and the curtain is drawn, the ballet girls are no longer girls from poor families, no longer accessories to anyone, but the brightest stars on the stage. These ballerinas' real life may be far from the glow of the stage: they may be the daughters of laundry workers or the children of working families, but here, in this brief time on the stage, she can break away from it all and dance a dance that lifts her into the limelight.

What ballerinas get from this job is the realization of their self-worth. Only when they are on stage, they are not commodities to be traded, not a financial source for their families, but they are themselves.

## 5. Projection of Degas' Inner Thoughts

Degas' ballerinas are often nameless and without recognizable faces, which can be assumed that Degas did not care to embody the identity of the ballerina to audiences, thus the ballerina seems to become a group image, the core of which is a projection of Degas' inner thoughts [10].

Degas did not have a smooth painting career; neither did he consider himself to belong to any school of painting, nor did he have any proud painting achievements during his lifetime. He once focused on being a history painter, focusing on historical scenes and family portraits, but his works were not noticed in the salons he exhibited in. After changing his painting style to focus on ordinary people in different corners of Paris, he still did not receive public recognition for his work. In 1881, Degas exhibited his sculpture *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, which featured Marie Van Goethem as a model for a young ballet dancer. The sculpture showed the young ballet dancer in her true form, not the posture that she did on stage, but her standing position in daily practice. However, he was heavily attacked by critics because of the wide gap between the image shown in the sculpture and the public's image of a ballerina on stage, her posture is not light enough, and her dress is not flashy enough.

## 6. Conclusion

What Degas gained from the images of the ballerinas was a resonance with himself, as he recorded their every move day after day, depicting their life with his brush. It may take years of practice for a ballerina to get a chance to appear on stage, to become a star. Degas, like the ballerinas, looked forward to the day when he would be recognized by the public for his several years of repetitive painting. By depicting the ballerinas on stage, Degas pins his expectations on the ballerinas, as the stage lights up, the two dreams are lit up together. Degas' dancers are not the personification of anxiety. On the contrary, the impressionistic brushstrokes and light and shadow in the stage lighting and repair and training poses make everything seem more idealized and give a romantic air to the unbearable situation of life. This style is not fleeting, but continues throughout Degas's creative process. This high degree of stylization of brushwork, color, and figure form reflects Degas's transformation from observer to sympathizer. This sympathizer is not an emotional value that emits sympathy outwardly. It is an emotional value that points precisely to the interior of the artist's creative career. Degas's women are not simply depicted as gender identities of their time. In the history of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, the Impressionist painters, who were repressed and marginalized by the mainstream aesthetics of society, also played the role of women in the value system of society. Degas' characterization in front of and behind the scenes is likewise a confirmation of self-worth. If art historians once tended to use empathy and sympathy as a systemic construction of the masculine perspective as the emotional basis for Degas's work on the dancing girl, then similarly, separating Degas's creatorship from his feminist identity in today's study leads to the same theoretical shortcomings. An understanding of his dancers' work is more akin to a theoretical attempt to homogenize the identity of the artist with the identity of the feminist. This

theoretical attempt will also bring new insights to more scholars in feminist-oriented art historical research.

## References

- [1] Broude, N. (2018). *Edgar Degas and French Feminism, ca. 1880: "The Young Spartans," the Brothel Monotypes, and the Bathers Revisited*. In *The Expanding Discourse* (pp. 268-293). Routledge.
- [2] Broude, N. (2018). *The expanding discourse: Feminism and art history*. Routledge.
- [3] Nather, F. C., & Bueno, J. L. O. (2012). *Timing perception in paintings and sculptures of Edgar Degas*. *KronoScope*, 12(1), 16-30.
- [4] Callen, A., & Degas, E. (1995). *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas*.
- [5] Armstrong, C. M., & Degas, E. (1991). *Odd man out readings of the work and reputation of Edgar Degas*. University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Cunningham, C. C. (1938). *Two Dancers, a Pastel Edgar Degas 1834-1917*. *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, 36(217), 74-76.
- [7] DeVonyar, J., Degas, E., & Kendall, R. (2002). *Degas and the Dance*. Harry N Abrams Incorporated.
- [8] Safford, L. B. (1993). *Mallarmé's influence on Degas's aesthetic of dance in his late period*. *Nineteenth-century French studies*, 419-433.
- [9] Lindsay, S. G., Barbour, D., & Sturman, S. (2010). *Edgar Degas Sculpture* (pp. 54-81). Washington, DC, USA: National gallery of art.
- [10] Kendall, R., Degas, E., Druick, D. W., & Beale, A. (1998). *Degas and the little dancer*. Berghahn Books.