

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS Edgar Degas
The Dancing Class
Grade Three

Edgar Degas (duh GAH) (1834-1917)

Source: *Pocket Library of Great Art; World Book Encyclopedia*

Though Degas is known as the painter of ballet, he also was skilled at painting portraits, a draftsman, and a superb sculptor. He was born in Paris, France, in 1834 into a wealthy family. Everyone expected him to be a banker like his father. However, Edgar had even as a child dreamed of being an artist. He had traced figures of knights in armor as just a young boy.

He tried to paint historical subjects but gave them a modern feeling. Soon he began painting portraits and was able to capture the inner life of his sitters. He first made drawings from life, then re-created his sitters from sketches and memory.

After the war of 1870 in which Degas served, he began painting subjects from the opera house and ballet. Here was the fluid movement, the flash of color and arresting play of light that he loved. Degas developed the pastel medium to a new brilliance of color and composition. He tilted the floor of a rehearsal room; he peered down from opera boxes; he stood in the wings and glimpsed fresh, unforeseen slices of life. In his studies of dancers he re-created not only glamorous moments on the stage but also the hours of strain and weariness of the young girls exercising or waiting in the wings.

Degas is considered the most popular French Impressionist style painters. The Impressionists “suggested” their subjects in quick, short brushstrokes, striving to show what we see at a glance, rather than what we know about the subject. They were influenced by the developing scientific study of light and color.

Degas had few friends and never married. In 1917 at the age of 83 he died, practically blind, and not really appreciated by people of the time. It was only in later years that his artistic genius has been recognized and appreciated.

ART PRESENTER PROGRAM

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR:

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1. What do you see? How many people?
2. What are they doing? How do you think the artist was able to get so many people into the painting?
(He observed dancers and sketched them in many positions. He put them together in the painting.)
3. Why is the man in the picture?

Composition:

4. Where are the dancers?
5. Is it a small or large room?
6. From what part of the room are we looking at the scene?
7. why did Degas choose to paint the scene from this angle? (He could show the dance studio and all the dancers surrounding the teacher).
8. Besides the dancers and the man, what else is a large part of the painting? (floor)

Line:

9. What makes us notice the floor? (lines, color in contrast with white costumes)
10. What kind of lines did the artist use to draw the floor? (diagonal)
11. Why did the artist use diagonal lines? (helps us see space from the front to back of the painting)
12. What other diagonal lines do you see? (ceiling, top of doorway, row of ballerinas, red fan, two front dancers form diagonal)
13. Besides diagonal, what other kinds of lines are there? (vertical—cane, columns, door frame, window pane, some of dancers, piano leg, watering can)
14. Are there any horizontal lines? (ceiling and cornice at end of room)

Color:

15. What colors did artist use in the painting?
16. Are there any bright colors? Where are they?
17. Is there more than one shade of any color? (green walls, sash, watering can, columns, gray green of man's clothes)

Perspectives:

18. What part of the painting seems closest? How do you know? (figures are larger)

19. Do you think the dancer in the foreground is really larger than the man—in real life?
20. Raise your hand if you would like to have this painting in your home.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES TO ACCOMPANY

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1. Movement picture

Materials: paper, colored chalks, pencil, colored pencils

Think about people and how they look when they are in motion. Then, you may try to sketch someone in motion. Afterwards, color them. If you would prefer, choose one of the two provided copies of either a dancer or baseball player in motion. Color them. Notice how their body is in motion.

2. Sour milk chalk pictures

Materials: milk mixed with vinegar until it thickens (3 tablespoons per cup should do it); chalk; various colors of construction paper.
(start with 1 TBSP of vinegar and 1 cup of milk) Add more vinegar if needed.

With large brushes paint construction paper, covering completely until Thoroughly dampened with the vinegar and milk mixture. Apply chalk to wet Surface, blending colors with fingers. Paper will dry with chalk permanently Adhering to the surface.

Do not be afraid to try this project. It is not as messy or smelly as it sounds. Some nice effects can be achieved. Children will love the unique project. Be sure to wash out brushes with soapy water.

You may borrow brushes at the BCA.

3. You may want to play the CD of ballet music while the children are painting to encourage a mood that Degas may have wanted to depict.
4. Action figures

Materials: pipe cleaners, small cardboard squares (optional)

Using pipe cleaners, students are to make figures in some action pose. Since Degas did ballerinas, that might be good subject matter. Figures can be stapled

To small squares of cardboard to make them stand upright.