

Manet / Degas



Édouard Manet, *Berthe Morisot reclining* (detail), 1873
Oil on canvas, 26 × 34 cm
Paris, Musée Marmottan Monet

Edgar Degas, *Young Woman with Ibis* (detail), 1857-1858
(reworked 1866-1868?)
Oil on canvas, 100 × 74,9 cm
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

28 March – 23 July 2023
Musée d'Orsay

Why did you want to bring Manet and Degas together in the same exhibition?

Stéphane Guégan / Isolde Pludermacher

To discuss Manet (1832-1883) and Degas (1834-1917) together means trying to understand one in relation to the other, examining their similarities and their differences, and sometimes their divergences. Many analogies are to be found between these key figures in the “New Painting” of the 1860-1880s, from their subjects to their stylistic choices, the places where they exhibited to those where they met, from the dealers to the collectors around whom their individual careers were based. Their biographies share

other common threads, from their experience of the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war to the Nouvelle-Athènes café in Place Pigalle, where stimulating discussions took place and tensions were appeased. As indeed there were clashes and disputes. Manet refused to join Degas in the impressionist circle, through career choice. And Degas, while he believed in the power of the group, was equally careful not to paint like Monet. By showing Manet and Degas in the light of their contrasts, this exhibition endeavours to cast a new look at the complicity and inescapable rivalry of these two singular creative forces, unique in so many respects.

Biographical landmarks

1832

23 January: Birth of Édouard Manet in Paris. His father is a senior civil servant at the Ministry of Justice, his mother the daughter of a diplomat.

1834

19 July: Birth of Edgar Degas in Paris. His father is a banker, his mother the daughter of a New Orleans merchant.

1850

After modest studies and a failed apprenticeship as a sailor, Manet joins the renowned studio of painter Thomas Couture, a loyal republican.

1854

After completing his studies in law, Degas passed the exam to be admitted into the École des Beaux-Arts. He also receives a formal training with Louis Lamothe and follows the teachings of Ingres.

Did the two painters receive the same training?

I.P. – Manet and Degas had closely studied the Old Masters, a constant source of inspiration for their work throughout their careers. Legend has it that they met at the Louvre, in front of a painting by Velázquez, from which Degas was producing an engraved copy with a technical audacity that surprised Manet. This relationship with tradition is largely shaped by their upbringing. Both visited the Louvre with their families in their youth: Degas with his father, a fine connoisseur with connections to collectors, Manet with his maternal uncle who first encouraged him to practise drawing. They then trained on the fringes of the École des Beaux-Arts, but with artists who enjoyed official recognition. Although they were both critical of their teachers, they received an apprenticeship largely based on copying the Old Masters in the Louvre or the Print Room of the Imperial Library. Their social and family background also offered them the opportunity to go abroad, to further enrich their artistic education and culture. Both artists travelled to Italy several times in the 1850s, where they discovered the masterpieces in the museums and the frescoes adorning monuments. In terms of contemporary masters, it was Ingres and Delacroix whom they admired.



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1

Édouard Manet,
*Madonna and Child with
St. Catherine* [also known as
The Virgin with the Rabbit]
(after Titian), 1850-1860
Oil on canvas, 70 × 84 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre

2

Edgar Degas,
Beach Scene, 1869-1870
Oil on canvas, 47,5 × 82,9 cm
Londres, National Gallery

1856

From the summer of 1856 to March 1859, Degas tours Italy and travels to Florence, Rome and Naples, hosted by friends and family.

1857

In October, Manet returns to Italy having first stayed in Venice in 1853. This time he is drawn to Florence and its masters.

1860

In the early 1860s Manet is said to have come across Degas in the Louvre while the latter was engraving Velázquez's *Infanta Margarita* directly on a copper plate.

1861

Manet exhibits *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs M[anet]* and *The Spanish Singer* at the Salon, which earns him an honourable mention and sudden fame, with the support of Théophile Gautier.

1863

After exhibiting a dozen paintings at the Galerie Martinet, Manet attracts attention at the Salon des Refusés where his *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* divides critics.

The names of Manet and Degas are linked to impressionism, but is it that straightforward?

S.G. – It all depends on how one defines the notion of impressionism. Today, we like to insist on a paradox: at the start of the 1870s, Manet kept his distance from the “dissident” movement, though his paintings were clearly in line with it. Conversely, Degas never displayed his contempt for an overly sensitive approach to reality more than he did during those same years when he took the leadership of the group. However, this apparent double standard does not stand up to scrutiny. Degas and Manet were aware of the rise of a movement for “open-air landscaping” based on unity of motif and mobility of perception by the so-called Barbizon painters, such as Corot or Rousseau, and their direct followers who were already imposing a painting of atmosphere, with

changing light and new angles. They seized upon it quite rapidly, with audacity, and used it to develop their careers, as the commercial demand in London and Paris for seascapes and bathing scenes could not be ignored. To quote Manet in 1867, “to make one’s impression” seemed to be a necessity. However, like Degas, he practised a distinctive form of impressionism.



1865

During an eventful Salon, Manet and Degas take on the press and the government with mixed results. While Manet's *Olympia* provokes unprecedented

controversy, Degas's *Scène of War in the Middle Ages* goes unnoticed.

1866

A keen observer of horse racing, Degas exhibits *Scene from the steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* at the Salon, probably influenced by Manet's *Episode in a Bullfight*, exhibited in 1864.

1868

During the summer, Manet suggests to Degas that they should travel together to London, where "there might be an outlet for our products". Their friend James Tissot had

already conquered the English market.

What can we infer by comparing works by Manet and Degas on the same subjects, such as horse races?

S.G. – In his twilight years and following Manet's death, Degas reproached his rival for having robbed him of some of his subjects, such as dancers and bath scenes. There is no clear answer to this dilemma, all the more so as the context of the day must be taken into account as must the effect of healthy rivalry between artists, modern or otherwise. With regard to horses, we know that the pages of Degas's early sketchbooks are filled with wild horses let loose in the streets of Rome, horses for breeding and, very early on, horse races imported from England at the end of the 18th century and ideally suited to the aspirations of Parisian modernity in the 1860s. With their social glamour, financial allure, sporting competition and the thrill of speed, their advantages as an artistic subject are obvious. Although his name became closely associated with the frenzy for the horse-racing craze, Degas was far from being the first to exploit it. Images from the press would repeat over and over the same scenes and effects such as the flying gallop and the excited crowds, which are clichés of the genre. Degas stands out by capturing a different temporality. Rather than the gallop, he favours the moment before the start of the race, the psychology of the jockeys, the subtle choreography of the mounts champing at the bit, letting us admire the finesse of a neck, the outline of the legs, the luminous shimmer on their coats. On the other hand, Manet's depictions are all gallop, visual explosion and accelerated time.

What about the theme of Parisian women?

I.P. – In the 1870s, the artistic dialogue between Manet and Degas took on a new dimension. The imbalance that could be observed during the previous decade lessened: while Manet was still perceived as one of the dominant figures of the New Painting, Degas took on equal prominence, in particular through his role in organizing the impressionist exhibitions. The works each one produced during this period show the proximity of their sources of inspiration – with modern Paris as a central theme – but also differences in conception and execution.

With a sensibility close to that of the naturalist novels of the Goncourt brothers or Émile Zola, both artists depict Parisian women in familiar environments: women in boulevard brasseries, café-concert singers, prostitutes... Manet, a fashion enthusiast, generally tended to paint his models with a certain majesty, in poses and outfits that highlighted their individuality, while Degas sought above all to capture them in "familiar and typical attitudes", studying the expressive power of their bodies as much as their faces. He analysed the various gestures of female workers practising their trade (dancers, laundresses, milliners, etc.). While he was also interested in accessories, it was not so much because of his taste for fashion, like Manet, but rather for the complex interplay of shapes and compositions that he could draw from them.

3

Édouard Manet,
The Races at Longchamp, 1866
Oil on canvas, 43,9 × 84,5 cm
Art Institute of Chicago

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Edgar Degas,
Women on the Terrace of a Café in the Evening, 1877
Pastel over monotype,
41 × 60 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

1870-1871

During the “Terrible Year” where the Franco-Prussian war, the return of the Republic and the Commune all took place, Manet and Degas demonstrate uncommon patriotism.

1874

On 15 April, the historic first “impressionist exhibition” opens. Degas exhibits ten works; Manet refuses to participate out of loyalty to his painting and career choices.

1876

Among Manet’s submissions refused by the Salon jury is *L’Artiste*, a portrait of the painter Marcellin Desboutin, a bohemian icon. Degas also depicts Desboutin lost in thought in *Au café*.

1879

Shortly after the opening of the “fourth impressionist exhibition” to which Degas sends some twenty works, Manet exhibits *En bateau* at the Salon.

1881

Antonin Proust, a fellow pupil in Couture’s studio who had become Minister of Fine Arts in the Gambetta government, makes Manet a Knight of the Legion of Honour.



3



4

1883

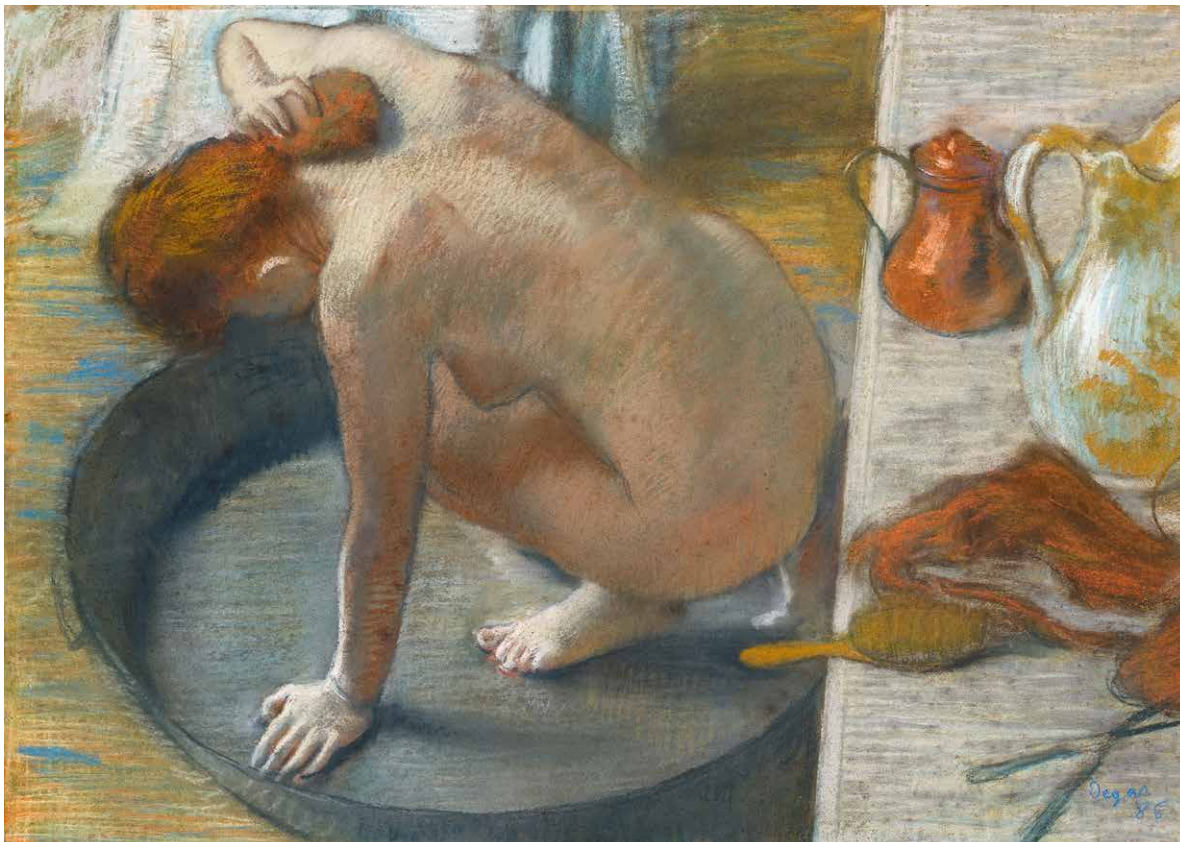
At Manet's funeral on 3 May, Degas is quoted as saying: "He was greater than we thought." Degas would outlive his friend and rival by more than

thirty years. He was blind when he died on 27 September 1917.

Did Manet and Degas reinvent the female nude?

S.G. – Yes, given their knowledge of the former masters from whom they drew their audacity, from Titian to Rubens, from Velázquez to Goya, not to mention the rise of photography, which encouraged them to break free from the codes of aesthetic propriety. It should be noted in passing that the 19th century, from Ingres and Chassériau onwards, saw a series of debates and scandals caused by the public exhibition of nudes deemed more or less indecent. The issue in question is therefore a groundswell contrary to common morality. Since the Renaissance and its reappropriation of Greco-Roman heritage, the nude has played a central role in artistic education dedicated to capturing the most harmonious aspects of nature.

This so-called classical theory turns the human body into an image of perfection. By dissociating it from nudity and therefore from the sexual body, and by establishing sculpture as a model for painting, an aesthetic ideal was established and perpetuated through imitation. To challenge this discipline was to overturn an entire system of values and this is precisely what Romantics, such as Delacroix, and Realists, such as Courbet, were doing in the 19th century, before photography and the New Painting swept aside the canons of beauty to depict the naked body in a realistic manner. From Manet's *Olympia* to Degas's *Baigneuses*, female nudity, far from being a mere subject, displays a form of truth that is both inviting and disconcerting.



What is their approach of men and women?

I.P. – One of the main differences in personality between Manet and Degas lies in their relationships with women. Described as a seducer, Manet was, in the opinion of his contemporaries, never more comfortable than in female company. Equally proverbial is Degas's reserve. His discretion about his intimate life earned him ridicule from Manet, who is said to have told Berthe Morisot: "He is unable to be natural; he is not capable of loving a woman, even of telling her, nor of doing anything."

These differences in temperament are partly reflected in their art: while Manet depicts women with a pose and gaze that convey a certain assurance, even a form of complicity with the spectator (*Nana*), the relationships between men and women usually appear troubled or unbalanced in Degas's works. His portrayal of the female nude has earned him a reputation as a misogynist artist. The reality is far more complex, and in his writings we can perceive the sensitivity of a man preoccupied with his heart and dreaming of marital bliss.



5
Edgar Degas,
The Tub, 1886
Pastel on card, 60 × 83 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

6
Édouard Manet,
Woman in a tub, 1878
Pastel on canvas, 55 × 45 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay



7
Édouard Manet,
The Balcony, 1868-1869,
Oil on canvas, 170 × 125 cm
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

7

Among the impressionists, we find the female figure of Berthe Morisot. How important was she to Manet and Degas?

S.G. – It is undeniable that Berthe Morisot and Édouard Manet appreciated each other and, in the field of art, stimulated each other. The salon that Berthe Morisot's parents opened to artists, musicians and writers at the end of the Second Empire was a hotbed of modernity. Women and men talked about art and politics with equal standing. Aesthetic disagreements took second place to the pleasure of discussing them. Berthe and her sister Edma, who had received painting lessons and who had access to the family studio, made their debut at the Salon in 1864. However, it was after spending time with Fantin-Latour and later with Manet and Degas that Berthe Morisot decided to embark on a real career as an artist in the face of the social constraints of the time. Manet gained stature in her circle as from 1868-1869, producing several portraits of Morisot and never simply depicting her anonymously as if she were a mere model. All of these show an elegant and singular Parisian woman, an accomplice and advocate of the New Painting. Moreover, unlike Manet, whose brother she married in 1874, Morisot became a full member of the impressionist circle that year.

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Tours

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€6 / members €4

Guided tours with a lecturer (1h30)

From 4 April to 13 July 2023
Tuesdays 11.30am and 2.30pm
Wednesday 11.30am
Thursday 11.30am and 7.30pm
Friday 11.30am
Adults €10 / €6 (+ entry fee)

Family tours

Exhibition tour adapted for a children's audience

Visits and workshops

for children aged 9 to 12

Walking, trotting or galloping (2h)
€7

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Activity programme and bookings



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