

Isabel Smith, HIS 228, May 10th, 2021

*Ugly and Poor: Degas and the 19th-Century French Ballet*

The Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers, Etc. was a group of artists that formed to be independent of the French government-sponsored Salon and was largely responsible for the development of the Impressionism art movement.<sup>1</sup> The “Anonymous Society” was anything but unknown; instead, they were some of the most famous artists of their time, with Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Renoir, and more. They held eight art exhibitions from 1874 to 1886, and at the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition in 1881, Degas revealed his statue, “Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen,” which depicted a young female ballet dancer. The work faced heavy backlash, receiving responses which called the sculpture a “girl-monkey” and a “flower of precocious depravity,”<sup>2</sup> as well as “repulsive,” “vicious,” and “a threat to society.”<sup>3</sup> The statue, which only stayed in the exhibition for two weeks, was never publicly shown again, and only rediscovered when Degas died in 1917.

An Impressionist artist in 19th-century France, Degas is renowned for his depictions of ballet and the female form. The modern art form of ballet, though it finds its origins in renaissance-era Italy, expanded and grew in popularity during the reign of King Louis XIV, the

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Samu, “Impressionism: Art and Modernity.” *Metmuseum.org*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd\\_imml.htm#:~:text=In%201874%2C%20a%20group%20of,and%20Camille%20Pissarro%2C%20among%20others/](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm#:~:text=In%201874%2C%20a%20group%20of,and%20Camille%20Pissarro%2C%20among%20others/)

<sup>2</sup> Ilyana Karthas, “The Politics of Gender and the Revival of Ballet in Early Twentieth Century France.” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (2012): 960-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41678946>. 961.

<sup>3</sup> “Edgar Degas, Little Dancer Aged Fourteen, 1878-1881.” National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/degas-little-dancer-aged-fourteen.html>.

‘Sun King’ of mid-17th-century France who staged dances, called ballet de cour, in the courts.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the century, ballet developed as a rigid, codified art form with established technique; in 1661, the Royal Academy of Dance was founded (with the first women admitted two decades later) and in 1779, a ballet school in Paris was created to train young dancers.<sup>5</sup> However, as 19th-century France experienced population growth in major cities, there was an influx of overcrowding, poverty, and disease, with the poor’s “social class and physical environment [determining their] predisposition to ill health and early mortality.”<sup>6</sup> New forms of wealth came to France, and with it increased exploitation of labor, especially female labor.<sup>7</sup> By this time, many of the girls in ballet schools were from impoverished backgrounds, sent there at an early age to earn money for their family. They were called *petits rats*. This is the atmosphere Degas observed and studied.

Born in Paris, France in 1834 to a relatively wealthy family, Edgar Degas was famous for his paintings and drawings of ballet dancers, though he experimented with printmaking and sculptures as well.<sup>8</sup> His interest in art began at a young age, and he exhibited at the Salon for a short period in the mid-to-late 1860s, but he resented their “rigid rules, judgements, and elitism,”

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<sup>4</sup> “A Brief History of Ballet,” Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, September 15, 2020, [https://www.pbt.org/learn-and-engage/resources-audience-members/ballet-101/brief-history-ballet/?gclid=CjwKCAjw7J6EBhBDEiwA5UUM2rR4TydrBo7OpHFGvuXTbFPpSGImELP3hyHqlhDr21kDI8NNyUcfoBoC2KYQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.pbt.org/learn-and-engage/resources-audience-members/ballet-101/brief-history-ballet/?gclid=CjwKCAjw7J6EBhBDEiwA5UUM2rR4TydrBo7OpHFGvuXTbFPpSGImELP3hyHqlhDr21kDI8NNyUcfoBoC2KYQAvD_BwE)

<sup>5</sup> Edward I. Bleiberg, James Allan Evans, Kristen Mossler Figg, Philip M. Soergel, and John Block Friedman, eds. *Arts and Humanities Through the Eras*. Vol. 5: The Age of the Baroque and Enlightenment 1600-1800. 5 vols. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005. *Gale eBooks* <https://link.gale.com/apps/pub/5BBY/GVRL?u=nclivedc&sid=GVRL>.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Kudlick, “Smallpox, Disability, and Survival in Nineteenth-Century France: Rewriting Paradigms from a New Epidemic Script,” Burch, Susan, and Rembis, Michael, eds. *Disability Histories*. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2014. 188.

<sup>7</sup> “Methods and Theoretical Approaches.” In *Methods & Theory/Periods/Regions, Nations, Peoples/Europe & the World*, edited by Peter N. Stearns, [1]. Vol. 1 of *Encyclopedia of European Social History*. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001. *Gale eBooks* <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3460500014/GVRL?u=nclivedc&sid=GVRL&xid=81118758>.

<sup>8</sup> “Biography of Edgar Degas.” Edgar Degas Biography | Life, Paintings, Influence on Art. <https://www.edgar-degas.org/biography.html>.

and left to join the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers, Etc.<sup>9</sup> However, Degas often clashed with other members of the group and even Impressionism itself. He disliked the concept of plein-air painting that many Impressionists practiced and the ‘spontaneous’ nature of the art style: “no art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and of the study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing,” Degas said.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, his artwork—with its nontraditional compositions, color, and form, and its subject matter of Paris—ties him to Impressionism.

According to historian and University of Missouri professor Ilyana Karthas’ article “The Politics of Gender and the Revival of Ballet in Early Twentieth Century France,”

Degas depicted the ballet he observed in the 1880s: it was primarily a working-class profession and an art form in decline. In his work, the ballet dancer was no longer a metaphoric symbol of nobility, grace of poetry, but rather conceived first and foremost as a sexual being, a worker, and a titillating subject. Indeed, to the French public of 1881, the ballet had truly come to represent a modern space of cross-class cultural exchange, a world of display and male possession, and an eroded French art form.<sup>11</sup>

Karthas looks at the evolution of ballet holistically in her article, arguing that “the change in ballet’s national status as an art form in France [as it lost status and became more working-class] went hand in hand with changing cultural perceptions of ballet’s relationship to gender and the body.”<sup>12</sup> But her point on Degas’ work depicting ballet is of great importance to me, as I aim to more specifically examine Edgar Degas’ portrayal of women and gender dynamics. Another historian, art and feminism scholar Norma Broude, explains in her journal article, “Degas’s ‘Misogyny,’” that most contemporary scholars agree that Degas was a misogynist and woman-

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<sup>9</sup> “Biography of Edgar Degas.”

<sup>10</sup> “Biography of Edgar Degas.”

<sup>11</sup> Karthas, 962.

<sup>12</sup> Karthas, 964.

hater.<sup>13</sup> However, through examining Degas' works like "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," "Study in the Nude for The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer," "Waiting (L'Attente)," and "The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage," I will analyze how girls were viewed, sexualized, objectified, and dehumanized by Degas and wealthy white men during mid-to-late-19th-century France, instead of specifically how Degas personally felt about women. The work of Edgar Degas depicts how ballet in the 19th century was tightly driven by, dependent upon, and irrevocably entangled with misogyny and the abuse and manipulation of both women and young girls, as well as class-based exploitation by those with wealth and power. Degas produced this artwork through observation, simply portraying the power imbalances rather than having sympathy for the dancers or aiming to dismantle power structures within the institution. The rejection of his sculpture "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" was in part due to the inability of, or utter refusal of the French bourgeoisie at the time to examine the classist and anti-female configuration of the institution of ballet.

The first sculpture of Degas' I will examine is the aforementioned "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen."<sup>14</sup> The bronze sculpture is a little over three feet tall, standing atop a wooden base, and was displayed in a glass case at the 1881 exhibition. Lost wax cast patinated bronze, linen bodice, muslin tutu, and light pink satin hair ribbon and slippers make up the work. It also contains real human hair. The materials of the work lend themselves to a more naturalistic and realistic rendering of the young girls at the opera, as opposed to other, more romantic and idealistic portrayals that were common at the time.

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<sup>13</sup> Norma Broude, "Degas's 'Misogyny.'" *The Art Bulletin* 59, no. 1 (1977): 95-107. doi:10.2307/3049600. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/3049600?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3049600?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Degas, "Little dancer Aged 14 (Ballet dancer, dressed)," Sculpture, First exhibited 1880, Cast 1921, Musée d'Orsay. [https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARMNIG\\_10313260068](https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARMNIG_10313260068).

Marie Van Goethem, a young student at the Paris Opera Ballet, was the model for the sculpture. Van Goethem wears a corset-style bodice flesh to her pubescent chest with the smallest of curves by her breast; it is stiff, unflattering, and simple, a light brown with no detailing. Below the top is a light pink, almost tan, tulle skirt, with a raw, frayed edge that hits her legs just above the knee. The skirt juxtaposes the colorful costumes depicted in Degas' paintings. Van Goethem stands in a ballet fourth position—with one leg in front of the other, both turned out to almost 90 degrees—but the rest of her positioning does not follow the strict rules of ballet; her hands are limply clasped behind back, and her hips are jutting forward and not aligned directly below her shoulders. On the legs and arms, there are indentions in the bronze, especially around the knees, leaving her uneven and wrinkled. Her head tilts up, with no expression, and her hair sits in a loose braid, tied with a pink ribbon and with real hair sticking out of the end. Her bangs messily pressed to her forehead, seemingly matted, she is the opposite of the pristine ballerina with the slicked-back bun. The sculpture lacks 'traditional beauty,' with Van Goethem's flat face, large forehead, and small eyes and mouth not meeting Eurocentric beauty standards. But she carries a certain pride with her, holding her head high with good posture (signifying her ballet training). Her eyes, however, are barely even open. The child looks exhausted.

The work is nothing like the romanticized ideas of ballet. She is painfully young—small and slim with no breasts and the face of a child—and, to the viewer at the time, clearly from poverty; her features mimic the theory of degeneration, an influential social and biological theory in 18th-and-19th-century Western Europe. It was utilized as a means to explain class differences, with the lower classes supposedly "burdened with various [inherited] maladies" as French philosopher and gender and sexuality theorist Michel Foucault explains in his 1976 novel, *The*

*History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, including criminal behavior, mental illness, sexual perversion, and homosexuality.<sup>15</sup> Physical characteristics of degeneracy were thought to include low foreheads and flat faces:<sup>16</sup> prominent features on the sculpture of Van Goethem. So, when the sculpture was revealed, the reaction from the public was one of horror. The sculpture was unlike most others during the 19th century—with artists adhering to ‘tradition’ and only working with bronze or another metal, not the mixed-media experimentalism of Degas, especially his use of hair—but it was mainly the subject matter itself which critics were so avidly against. Elie de Mont, an art critic, had this to say when the sculpture was displayed: “I don’t ask that art should always be elegant, but I don’t believe that its role is to champion the cause of ugliness.”<sup>17</sup> Van Goethem is ‘ugly’ —and placing worth (or lack of worth) in a child’s aesthetic appearance shows the extent to which women and girls were reduced to their looks and what they could ‘offer’ men—an ugliness that Degas crafted and his audience reviled. She is understood to be ugly and poor and therefore an abomination, and she represents how middle-class men view gender, view class, and view gender *and* class, together: the rats of the ballet industry. The juxtaposition in the work of conceptions around poverty, vulnerability, pride, and the absence of accepted and traditional feminine beauty within a sculpture (which through its use of unconventional materials was already outside the boundaries of the current appreciated aesthetic) was clearly unacceptable to the French bourgeoisie.

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage. 1990. 118.

<sup>16</sup> Stannard, Michael Wenley, “Degeneration Theory in Naturalist Novels of Benito Pérez Galdós,” A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, April 2011. [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/104788/1/Stannard\\_umn\\_0130E\\_11842.pdf](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/104788/1/Stannard_umn_0130E_11842.pdf). 29.

<sup>17</sup> “Edgar Degas, Little Dancer Aged Fourteen, 1878-1881.” National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/degas-little-dancer-aged-fourteen.html>.

To create this sculpture, Degas studied Van Goethem, having her pose for him for extended periods of time, and he molded another sculpture, this one never publicly exhibited: the around two-foot, five-inch “Study in the Nude for The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer.”<sup>18</sup> The bronze sculpture was modeled by Degas but was never cast during his lifetime and only posthumously in 1920. Though it was never a public work, the title is still notable, as Degas never says Van Goethem’s name, only calling her ‘the little fourteen-year-old dancer’ or simply ‘little Dancer’ (though the titles were in his native French.) Degas made her, a child, stand in unnatural positions for him—sometimes naked—for hours, and then did not refer to her in his works, and though that is not that uncommon, it is dehumanizing, especially when “Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen” was shown in a glass cage, like a creature or specimen.

In the “Study in the Nude for The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer,” Van Goethem wears no clothes, and without the frills of a costume (no matter how minimal it might be) her transitioning body—not-quite-a-girl and not-quite-a-woman—is even more noticeable. She has no breasts and no nipples, just a smooth chest. Van Goethem’s hair is pulled back into a bun. Though she stands in fourth position, all of her weight resides in her back leg instead of placed evenly between the two, as it would be if her hips were aligned properly: this time, instead of her hips pushing too far forward, they are too far back, resulting in a pronounced curve in the back and a rounded, protruding stomach, giving the impression that she has been standing in this pose for hours on end. The mere fact that Degas made this girl pose, clearly uncomfortable, *naked*, in front of him for so long emphasizes the lack of humanity or care that was shown to young women in poverty. And, the entire length of her legs are almost the same size, from thigh to calf,

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<sup>18</sup> Edgar Degas, “Study in the Nude for The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer,” Statue, Sculpture-Bronze, Modeled ca. 1878-80, Cast 1920, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731421\\_7731421\\_11459678](https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731421_7731421_11459678).

so her thighs seem oddly small for a dancer spending long days building muscle. With bulging knees and noticeable collarbones, she appears bony and emaciated, besides her stomach, which is slightly rounded, like a young child. For a fourteen-year-old, Van Goethem is significantly underdeveloped. And this can be traced back to two main factors: the extensive, gruelling hours of physical exertion and the destitute, impoverished conditions of most of the young girls sent to work.

The financial pressure put on young dancers can be felt in Degas' "Waiting (L'Attente)."<sup>19</sup> Degas is most known for his works on canvas or paper, and "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" was the only sculpture of his to be publicly exhibited, however short-lived its time in the exhibition was. His style is known for the sense of movement, with the vibrant colors of oil paints or pastels, and, of course, its depiction of ballet.<sup>20</sup> "Waiting (L'Attente)" is a pastel drawing on paper created in 1882. It shows two figures sitting on a bench, with their eyes looking down at the floor, a floor which Degas constructed loosely with browns, blues, and grays smeared together. A young female dancer is on the left, fully in costume; she wears a romantic white tutu with a blue ribbon pinned to her side, a white spaghetti-strap leotard with lace detailing on the shoulders, a blue ribbon around her neck like a necklace, light pink tights, and ballet slippers. Her light brown hair is in a neat slicked-back bun. Even sitting down and not performing, the dancer's legs are turned out, her feet both angling outwards. She is leaning over, with her upper body parallel to the floor, grabbing one of her ankles with her left hand, as if in pain, and resting her right arm on her other knee. Her face—obscured by shadow—stares at the floor.

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<sup>19</sup> Edgar Degas, "Waiting (L'Attente)," Pastel Drawing, about 1882, The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, Norton Simon Art Foundation, 83.GG.219. [https://library.artstor.org/asset/GETTY\\_GGMP\\_1031171690](https://library.artstor.org/asset/GETTY_GGMP_1031171690).

<sup>20</sup> "Biography of Edgar Degas."



On the right side of the work is a woman, dressed all in black. Only her face and hands are bare; she wears a floor-length dark dress with long sleeves and a black hat. Her hands are crossed in her lap with nervous energy, and she holds a black umbrella in her right hand. Both figures have dark, blotchy shadows, and the work has high contrast with bright whites and dark blacks. Other than the vibrant blue details on the dancer, there is mainly very neutral coloring (somewhat unlike Degas' usual work) and there are visible, sweeping, messy brush strokes: Degas' trademark style. Looking at the title, "Waiting (L'Attente)," 'l'attente' technically means 'the wait' in English, not 'waiting,' and the use of a noun here—and a noun with a definite article, the: not 'a wait' but *the* wait' —emphasizes the pressure put on this moment for both women, the importance that sits in this wait. In the painting, the stress and tension is tangible; it appears as if an invisible force or weight is pushing down on them, especially the dancer, who is almost fully bent over. The figures are stiff and solemn as they wait. Young female dancers were typically brought to auditions by older family members, presumably the woman in black, who could be a mother or older sister or aunt. The financial success would depend upon the girl: a heavy burden. And for the girls lucky enough to earn a selection, they were then forced to dance long hours for the remainder of their youth. Many of these girls lacked the physical beauty or social charm to ever have a realistic chance to perform on the main stage; however, they still served a purpose as sex workers for the men who frequented the schools as donors and patrons.

Degas' work "The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage" hints at these multi-generational, cross-class relationships.<sup>21</sup> It is a drawing that employs oil colors, watercolor, and pastel over pen-and-ink drawing on paper, laid down on bristol board and mounted on canvas. There are

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<sup>21</sup> Edgar Degas, "The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage," Drawing, oil colors mixed with turpentine, with watercolor and pastel over pen-and-ink drawing on cream-colored wove paper, laid down on bristol board and mounted on canvas, 1874. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731421\\_7731421\\_11075452](https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731421_7731421_11075452).

about fifteen female dancers on the stage, all dressed in white leotards and romantic, flowy, knee-length tutus with differently colored ribbons around their waists. As the dancers practice the ballet, Degas captures them mid-movement, all in various poses, some on the ground, some standing, and while most of the girls are in ballet positions, some of the ones on the left where the curtain would be seen to be waiting for their turn. The set is a blur of blues and greens around them which fades into the dark browns of the wall on the right side. There are heavy shadows and high contrast—*chiaroscuro*—that creates an eerie feeling.

A few men, dressed in black suits, observe the dancers. One stands between the cluster of them, directing movement, but the others sit back, reclining, and the right-most man has his legs extended and his hands resting in his pockets. He appears relaxed, contented, staring, examining, and leering at these girls in a predatory and cocky manner. The depiction of these wealthy men gives a voyeuristic impression (and raises the question of ‘why are they *really* there?’ to which the answer is, presumably, sex) as does Degas’ continued, obsessive stay at the opera, creating hundreds of artistic works of these women. The existence of the male gaze is palpable, and the dancers are objectified again and again: by the wealthy male patrons and by Degas. They are objects for male pleasure, and the contrast between the white, flowing, almost angelic costumes the young women wear and the men in their understated, clearly expensive black suits creates a light versus dark, good versus evil, pure versus debased dichotomy. However, two things are true: first, that the women are not ‘pure’; they are trapped in abusive system that forces them to be overworked, underfed, and maintain sexual relationships with these men, and second, that Degas does not care, at least enough to do anything, and rather, he passively observes, like he is watching animals on a safari rather than horrid conditions of real people.

Degas' portrayal of women and girls reveals how objectified and dehumanized they were. Regardless of Degas' status as an active misogynist or not, his witnessing of and continued depiction of these conditions shows that he was passive to their suffering; women were not viewed as people and rather existed as sex objects whose value was dependent upon how much wealthy men could exploit them.

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