

Edgar Degas

Born July 19, 1834 in Paris

Father- wealthy French banker & Mother-from New Orleans, LA, USA

Oldest of five (surviving) siblings

His mother died during the birth of her seventh child when Edgar was only 13.

Described as ill tempered, sensitive, because he was so unsure of himself, his talents and intelligence. He was also very lonely, probably because he wasn't very nice to those around him.

Very intelligent went to very prestigious boarding school

Studied hard, very good student, went on to law school to fulfill his father's orders.

He didn't like studying law & went to Italy to study art. Father saw his talent and encouraged him to continue. He was 21 when he took his first art class.

How fortunate our Moyer students are that they can study art at the age of 6,7,8!

During the second half of the nineteenth century in France, there was a group of artists who revolutionized art. Before they came along art was mostly portraits of people and still lifes. These artists got together because they loved art and France was the center of the art world. They talked and realized they did not want merely want to paint people – they wanted to paint them doing things. They did not want to just paint scenery – they wanted you to see the light, feel the cold or heat. They wanted to give art emotion. They were known primarily for sitting outside and painting quickly. A journalist looked at their art and as an insult called them “impressionists” – meaning that their paintings were mere representation of a first impression. And so it stuck: they were the impressionists.

The paintings were the first to portray life in a large city. It showed how the poor lived and worked and the rich enjoyed themselves. It was based on scenes in Paris – very elegant and fashionable. The Impressionists would go to the Louvre museum and copy the masterpieces. It was very tedious. Also at that time artists were building studios (atelier) that took the place of some art schools. An artist would study working directly with an artist to learn their technique.

The Salon was a place to show French art. Every 2 years there would be an exhibition. For a young artist – they wanted to be in the show for exposure. If they got their art in the exhibition then they could sell the art and make money. In 1863 there were so many pieces submitted and therefore so many rejected. At the time Napoleon III found out and was appalled and he ordered the Salon des Refuses – an art show for those who were turned down by the Salon.

At the same time photography was transforming the world and the influence of Japanese art was reaching Paris. All of this affected Edgar Degas tremendously. He is classed as an Impressionist but there was a huge difference:

They painted outside – he liked a studio setting

They painted quickly and spontaneously – he painted slowly. He would draw the subject first many times and then put the subject in settings that never happened, but could happen. He is considered an impressionist because there is so much emotion, detail and light in his paintings.

He is best known for his paintings of racehorses and dancers.

When Degas planned to paint a new picture he would begin by attending horseraces, operas and ballets. He would not always attend the big event, but would instead go to rehearsals or practices. He would sketch the horses and dancers many times, then return to his studio to paint. In fact, upon his death hundreds of notebooks were found in his studio each including drawings of only one item; ie.

hands, feet, ears, etc. He was quoted once as saying, "To copy what we see is fine, but it is much better to paint what we remember." What he is saying is sort of like the memory of the event (perhaps a party, a day at the park, or a vacation) is better than photograph. Have you ever looked at photographs and enjoyed the memories you recall better than the photo itself?

From his sketches he would create beautiful paintings. But something made his work different from the others: movement. He always wanted to give the viewer hints as to what had just happened and what would happen next in his picture.

As Degas got older he became blind, but that didn't stop his art career, he began sculpting. Degas died, very famous and wealthy, when he was 83.