

## Edgar Degas | Sample answer

**Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was a founding member of the impressionists, but was unique amongst his contemporaries in terms of style and subject matter. Discuss this statement with reference to a named work by Degas. Refer in your answer to subject matter, composition, light, colour and handling of materials. AND, how did the development of photography influence the work of impressionists? Illustrate your answer. (2013 Q13)**

Edgar Degas was born into a rich Parisian family in Paris in 1834. His parents supplied him with a private income so he could devote himself to art. He studied in the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and also visited Italy as a student to study Renaissance art. Degas is always remembered as an Impressionist, he was a member of the seminal group of Paris artists who began to exhibit together in the 1870's. He shared many of their novel techniques, was intrigued by the challenge of capturing effects of light and attracted to scenes of urban leisure. However, Degas's academic training, and his own personal predilection toward realism, set him apart from his peers and he rejected the label "Impressionist" preferring to describe himself as an "Independent".

Degas admired artist Ingres's clear linear drawings, the work of photographer Huybridges that studied human figures and horses, and Japanese woodblock prints, which led to Degas's use of unusual perspectives and off-centre pictorial compositions. He was very intrigued by the human figure, and in many of his images of women - dancers, singers, and laundresses - he strove to capture the body in unusual positions. While critics of the Impressionists focused their attacks on their formal innovations, it was Degas's lower class subjects that brought him the most disapproval.

Degas's academic training encouraged a strong classical tendency in his art, which conflicted with the approach of the Impressionists. While he valued line as a means to describe contours and lend solid compositional structure to a picture, they favoured colour, and more concentration on surface texture. As well as this, he preferred to work from sketches and memory in the traditional academic manner, while the Impressionists were more interested in painting outdoors.

## **La Classe De Danse (The Ballet Class)**

### **Subject matter**

"The Ballet Class" is one of Degas's most famous ballet pictures. It is set in a dance hall full of young female ballerinas. Dancers and their mothers are placed in a complex arrangement of groups on 3 sides of the famous teacher Jules Perrot. The ballerinas are all wearing white tutus with large colourful ribbons on the backs. We assume that the dancers are taking a break as they seem relaxed, one is scratching her back and another is fixing an earring. There is a large opening in the wall in the middle background, which centres and balances the composition.

### **Composition**

There is a subtle triangular composition made by the door, the instructor and the main ballerina, which draws us into the painting. Degas's clever use of bold colours throughout the painting - on the ribbons, head pieces and fan, helps to balance the composition and lead our eye into the painting. The loose detail on the pillars of the walls help to break up the composition and the diagonal lines of the floorboards accompanied with the distant wall adds depth to the painting.

### **Light and Colour**

There are two obvious light sources in this painting. We assume there is light streaming in through a window on the right of the room, from the light patches on the floor but also from the shading on the teacher's coat. As this was painted inside, Degas lacks the natural light his Impressionist peers would have gained by painting en plein air. We can notice a dominance of green in this painting. The use of bright bold colours carefully placed along the composition helps our eyes break up the picture. There are a number of instances of light and dark contrasting achieved by the

numerous light sources. Degas's use of dull and bold colours make the painting interesting and rhythmic.

### **Handling of materials**

Unlike his Impressionist friends, Degas uses precise, blended brushstrokes to create a light smooth finish. It lacks the detailed realism of the traditional art at the time but is not as loose as Impressionist artists would have made it. His expert use of shading gives his figures a three-dimensional solidity. This painting by Degas beautifully shows his style and indefinitely stands out when compared with other Impressionists work.

### **Photography**

The rise of Impressionism can be seen in part as a response by artists to a newly established medium of photography. The taking of fixed or still images provided a new medium which captures reality, and changed the way people in general, and artists in particular, saw the world. The immediacy of photography influenced artists and encouraged them to break away from previous planned Rembrandt style compositions. Learning from the science of photography artists developed a range of new painting techniques. Rather than competing with the ability of the photograph to record "a moment of truth", the Impressionists such as Monet felt free to represent what they saw in an entirely different way - focusing more on light, colour and movement in a way that was not possible with photography. Over time, these subjective observations became much more widely accepted as works of art, although initially they were thought to be "sketchy" or "unfinished".