

Leaving Cert Art History | Artist Summary

Sample Answer

Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917)

Background:

Born into a wealthy Parisian family, his parents gave him a private income so he could devote himself to art. He never experienced poverty and never married. Degas studied in the *École des Beaux-Arts* and visited Italy as a student to study Renaissance art. He met Manet in the Louvre who encouraged him to paint modern life and introduced him to many other artists at the *Café Geurbois*, where Degas absorbed some impressionist techniques. Degas admired the artist Ingres' clear linear drawings, the work of photographer Muybridges that studies human figures and horses, and also Japanese woodblock prints which led to Degas' use of unusual perspectives and off-centre pictorial compositions, which were often divided diagonally. Photography had a huge influence on Degas as his paintings often looked like snapshots, with human figures often cropped at the edge, like a snapshot. Degas also didn't like to paint *en-plein air* (outside, in open air).

Subject Matter:

Degas' main themes derived from contemporary life, e.g. dancers, horse racing, milliners and women doing every-day, ordinary things. He wanted to show the life going on behind the scenes, having an interest in more than just superficial appearance, unlike many other artists. He portrayed his subjects as if they did not realise they were being observed and asked people he knew to model.

Technique & Style:

Degas was first and foremost a draftsman. He maintained structure and precision in his work from his classical training and so it was very technical. He was a master of 'unexpected layout', his intention was to create a sense of spontaneity in his work, but all were carefully planned. He used pastel a lot more than paint to achieve more colour variation. He used a technique of blurring paint, done by painting wet paint on top of paint, creating fluid, loose brushwork.