

# Degas: 'A Passion for Perfection'

## Wide-ranging exhibition displays Degas's restless creativity

3 October 2017 – 14 January 2018

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

In the centenary year of the artist's death, the Fitzwilliam Museum will stage a major exhibition of its wide-ranging holdings of works by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), the most extensive and representative in the UK.

The Museum's collections will be complemented by an outstanding group of over fifty loans from private and public collections throughout Europe and the United States, several of which will be on public display for the first time. These include a group of paintings and drawings once belonging to the economist John Maynard Keynes, bought directly in 1918 and 1919 from Degas's posthumous studio sales in Paris, against a backdrop of German bombardment during World War I.

The remarkable breadth of works on display will include paintings, sculpture, drawings, pastels, etchings, monotypes, counterproofs and letters – some business-like, some heart-rending – written by Degas to friends and associates. Prominent in the exhibition will be Degas's work in three dimensions: posthumous bronze casts of dancers, horses and nudes, but also exceptionally rare lifetime sculptures in plaster and wax.



Edgar Degas, *Dancers in the wings*, c.1900-1905  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



Edgar Degas, *Dance Examination*, 1880, Denver Art Museum

The exhibition will show that Degas's relentless experimentation with technical procedures was a defining characteristic of his art. Abhorring complacency, Degas habitually revisited and reworked compositions and even individual poses, as if to mine the infinite possibilities of a given subject. 'It is essential to do the same subject over again, ten times, one hundred times,' Degas believed, 'nothing should be left to chance'. Was he driven by 'a passion for perfection', as one acquaintance claimed? Or can his resistance to closure be considered to be a marker of his modernity?

Degas repeatedly acknowledged his debt to his artistic predecessors, insisting that 'No art was ever less spontaneous than mine'. The exhibition will open with a selection of works that highlight Degas's reverence for classical antiquity and the Old Masters, as well as for painters and sculptors of his own century. A range of works by some of the artists Degas most admired, from 15th-century Florentine draughtsmen to Eugène Delacroix, Camille Corot and his artistic idol, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, will feature in the display, along with a number of beautiful and highly sensitive copies made by Degas from antique and Renaissance paintings and sculpture.

As a counterbalance and fitting homage in the centennial year, the exhibition will conclude with a fascinating overview of 20th- and 21st-century artists such as Walter Sickert, Picasso, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, R.B. Kitaj, Lucian Freud, Howard Hodgkin and Ryan Gander, who drew on Degas as he did from past artists, studying and learning from his example while 'doing something different'.

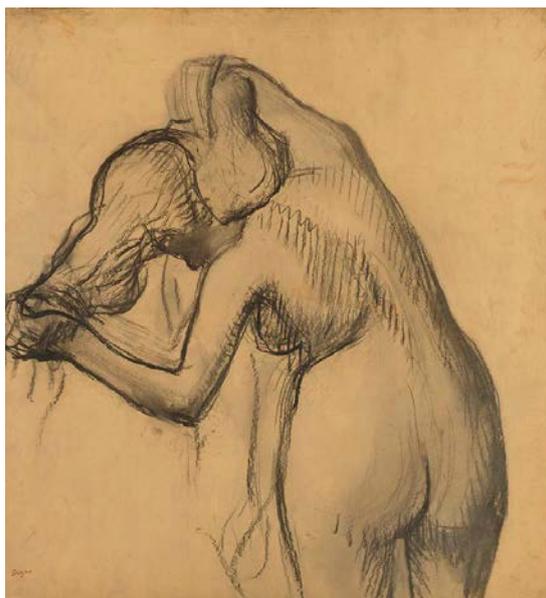


Edgar Degas, *Arabesque over the Right Leg, Left Arm in Front, First Study*, c.1882–95 © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



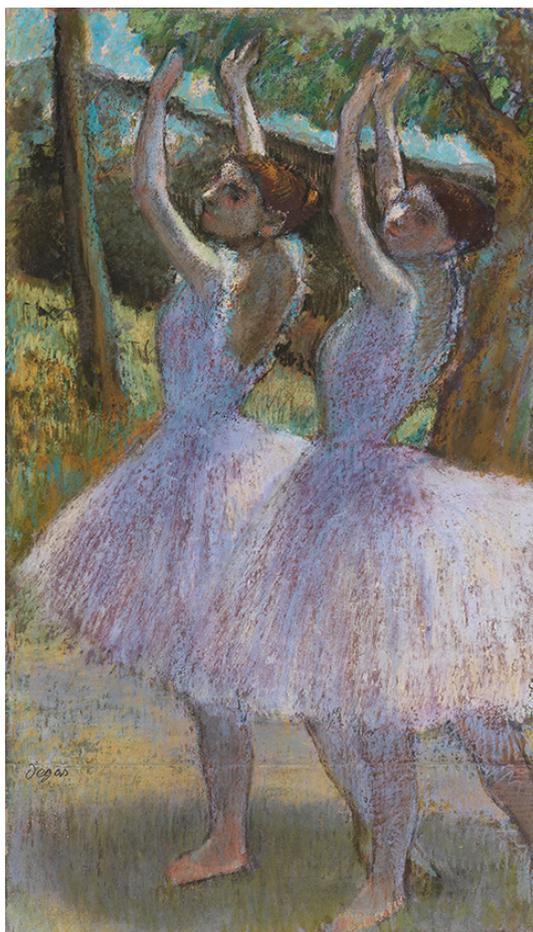
Howard Hodgkin, *After Degas*, 1993  
Private Collection © Howard Hodgkin. Courtesy Gagosian

Beyond this, the exhibition will chart Degas's lifelong fascination with the nude, from his classicizing academy studies of the 1850s to the powerful charcoal drawings of female bathers of the last decades of the century. Breaking radically with traditional depictions of the female body these unidealized representations of women washing, drying and scratching or combing abundant long hair, have an arresting monumentality that belies the banality of the workaday activities Degas depicted.



Edgar Degas, *Female Nude Drying her Neck*, c.1903  
© The Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge

A substantial part of the exhibition will be devoted to paintings, pastels, fan designs and sculpture on the theme of the dance. Degas represents dancers at work – performing arabesques, taking a bow at the curtain call, and waiting in the wings; but he also shows them at rest, nervously anticipating a dance examination, adjusting their costume, or acrobatically studying the soles of their feet. When asked in old age why he always painted ballet dancers, Degas replied because 'it is all that is left us of the combined movements of the Greeks.' Drawings and sculptures of dancers will highlight their classical ancestry, notably with reference to terracotta Tanagra figurines produced in the last quarter of the fourth century B.C.



Edgar Degas, *Female Dancers in Violet Skirts, their Arms Raised*, c.1896-8 © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Scenes of café life will contrast the boisterousness of musical performances with the isolation of its clients. *At the Café*, one of the most intriguing paintings in the Fitzwilliam's collection depicting two women in hesitant conversation, will be the subject of an in-focus study. Who are these women? What is the nature of the relationship that draws them together yet keeps them so resolutely apart? The painting will be considered from a number of different perspectives, ranging from the monochrome tones in which it is painted to Degas's fascination with the dynamics of conversation.



Edgar Degas, *At the Café*, 1875-7  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Finally, part of the exhibition will be devoted to a subject Degas repeatedly disparaged: landscape painting. Sceptical of the Impressionists' endeavour to paint directly from nature, Degas once famously turned up his collar because he claimed to feel a draught when looking at one of Monet's pictures. He nevertheless painted landscapes throughout his career either as backdrops for his representations of historical subjects, the racecourse and staged ballet performance or as independent works. Defying all expectations, he went on in 1892 to present twenty-five landscape monotypes in his first and only one-man show, one outstanding example of which will feature in the exhibition.



Giovanni Boldini, *Edgar Degas at a Café Table*, 1883  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Throughout the exhibition a sequence of portraits of Degas will show the artist at different stages of his life, from a hauntingly beautiful early self-portrait, drawn at the outset of his artistic career, to an animated sketch by his friend Giovanni Boldini showing Degas in full conversational flight at a café table, and a grand, if somewhat austere, bronze bust by the dentist-cum-sculptor, Paul Paulin showing Degas at the height of his fame.

Technical analysis of several of the exhibits – infrared examination of paintings and x-radiographs of wax sculpture – will prove revelatory, offering a new understanding of Degas’s highly idiosyncratic methods and media as a painter and sculptor, while the residue of fingerprints on several of his works conveys a vivid sense of the spontaneity and tactility of his approach.

An accompanying catalogue, edited by the exhibition’s curator, Jane Munro, Keeper of Paintings, Drawings and Prints at the Fitzwilliam Museum and published by Yale University Press will include essays by leading scholars of Degas’s work and of the media in which he worked. After the Fitzwilliam showing, the exhibition will travel to its partner institution the Denver Art Museum from 11 February - 20 May 2018.

-Ends-

## Notes to editors:

**Organized by the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, in association with Denver Art Museum**

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## About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam’s collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

The Fitzwilliam Museum  
Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1RB  
Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00;  
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

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