

# Family Guide



## Edgar Degas: Figures in Motion

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Above: Edgar Degas, *Dancer Seen From Behind* (about 1878-81). Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. James H. Lockhart Jr.

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# What do you like to draw?

Some people like to draw animals, others prefer to make pictures of beautiful scenery, and some artists like to draw pictures of other people. Edgar Degas was an artist who liked to make drawings, paintings and sculptures of figures – both people and animals – in motion.

Edgar Degas was born in Paris, France on July 19, 1834. His full name was Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas. He was named after his two grandfathers, Hilaire Degas of Naples, Italy, and Germain Musson of New Orleans, Louisiana, but he was known to his family and friends as Edgar.

Edgar was the oldest of five children. He had two brothers, Achille and René, and two sisters, Thérèse and Marguerite. The Degas family lived together in the big and busy city of Paris. Edgar liked to visit the many different museums there. He would spend hours just looking at famous paintings. Later, when he was older, he would return to the same museums and spend hours copying the paintings that he loved. He would set up his easel,

canvas, paint and brushes in the museum, and try to recreate some of his favorite paintings. Even when he became a famous artist,



he still enjoyed going back to the museums and practicing his drawing and painting skills there.

Edgar's family did not always want him to become an artist. When he was a young man, his father wanted him to become a lawyer. Edgar went to law school for a while, but he decided it wasn't for him. He enrolled at a large art school in Paris and began to take drawing and painting classes. He also spent a lot of time traveling throughout

Europe – especially Italy – making drawings and paintings and – you guessed it – visiting more museums! Edgar worked very hard at becoming an artist. His family soon realized how important art was to Edgar, and they offered him their encouragement and support.

As a young art student Edgar began to make paintings and drawings of the people and places he visited in Paris. Although many artists of his day were interested in making paintings based on Greek and Roman mythology and historical events, Edgar and his friends were interested

in portraying contemporary life in Paris. Edgar's favorite subjects to draw were people – especially ballerinas from the Paris Opéra – and animals – especially horses at the racetrack outside the city of Paris. He also liked to visit the busy cafés and shops in Paris. He was always sketching in his notebooks. He would then turn his sketches into larger drawings or finished paintings after working and reworking them in his studio.

# Can a sculpture move?

Edgar also made sculpture in his studio, using a mixture of wax and clay. First he would build an armature, or supporting structure, out of wire. The armatures often looked like stick figures. Then he would build up the figures using wax or clay. Since the insides of the sculptures were made of wire, Edgar could bend the arms and legs of the figures until he got it just the way he wanted. His sculptures and paintings often depicted the same figures in exactly the same poses. It was important to him to keep working on something until he felt he got it right.



Edgar Degas, *Dancer Holding Her Right Foot in Her Right Hand* (about 1898-1912).  
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, R.T. Miller Fund.

When Edgar died in Paris in 1917, his friends found over 100 wax and clay figures in his studio. Concerned that the sculptures would completely fall apart over time, Edgar's friends and family members decided to have many of the wax and clay figures cast in bronze. Here is one of Degas's bronze sculptures. The title of this piece is long, and descriptive! It's called *Dancer Holding Her Right Foot in Her Right Hand*. This sculpture stands 19 inches tall. Degas worked very quickly with the wax and clay to capture the model's pose. If you look closely, you may be able to detect a few of the artist's fingerprints visible in the finished bronze.

## At-Home Activity: Sculpture that Moves

Look carefully at the ways your friends and family members walk, run and stand. Use pipe cleaners or other bendable wire to capture their poses. Cut out paper and fabric scraps to dress the figures. You've just made movable sculpture!

# Can a sculpture dance?

The *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* is Edgar Degas's best-known sculpture. It is the only piece of sculpture that he exhibited while he was alive. Today you can see his sculptures in many different museum collections all over the world.

When this piece was first exhibited, many people were very surprised at what they saw – it was a sculpture of a little girl made out of colored wax, but it was dressed in real clothes, and it had a wig of real hair! Many people liked it, and many did not. What do you think?



Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* (about 1878-1881). International Arts, Memphis.  
Photo by Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini.

Several people liked it so much that they wanted to buy the sculpture. But Edgar refused all requests to sell it. The original wax sculpture was found in his studio after he died, and was first cast in bronze in 1922.

The model for the *Little Dancer* was Marie Geneviève van Goethem. She was born in Paris in 1865, and she became a student of the Paris Opéra Dance School when she was thirteen. The *Little Dancer* is a portrait of her when she was fourteen. Although this sculpture was made over 100 years ago, Marie looks very much like a young dancer today.

## At-Home Activity: Sculpture that Dances

We see sculpture from many different angles. Sometimes it even seems to change as we move around it. Make three identical dancers out of any type of modeling material. Arrange your finished sculptures in different positions. Your dancing sculptures will appear to move, and like Degas, you will have captured figures in motion!

# What do you think?

- What do you see in this picture?
- What kind of place might this be?
- What in the picture makes you say that?
- What do you think will happen next?
- What kinds of sounds might you hear in this picture?



Edgar Degas, *Dancers* (about 1900). Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Gift of Mrs. Charles H. Babcock.

Edgar Degas loved to visit the Paris Opéra and sketch the ballerinas during both rehearsals and performances. He wanted to capture the graceful movements of the dancers and the beautiful colors of the costumes and stage sets. He was also a perfectionist, and he would often draw or sculpt the same pose over and over. While the young dancers strove for perfection in their performances, Edgar strove for perfection in his art.

## At-Home Activity: Figures in Motion

Do you have action figures or dolls at home with movable arms and legs? Try posing them as dancers in a ballet or people in a crowd. Begin sketching with stick figures and add details as you go. Then experiment with a variety of drawing materials, such as colored pencil, crayon, paint and chalk.



# What do you see?

Edgar Degas was also fascinated by the movements of horses. In many ways, he thought they moved as beautifully as dancers. Many people wanted to buy Edgar's drawings and paintings of dancers and horses, but he had a hard time letting go of them.

One solution to this problem was for Edgar to work with the printmaker Georges Thornley. Edgar gave Mr. Thornley some of his drawings, and Mr. Thornley printed multiple copies for the artist to sell.



Georges W. Thornley (1857-1935), after Edgar Degas. *The Jockeys* (about 1888). Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Marion Stratton Gould Fund.

This is a lithograph, a drawing that is first done on a large, flat stone or a metal plate, then transferred to paper.

Edgar Degas once said, “*Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.*” He spent most of his life observing and recording the world he knew. His drawings, paintings and sculptures help us to see, and appreciate, the beauty of figures in motion.

## At-Home Activity: Become a Printmaker

Use a pencil to draw a picture on either a flat Styrofoam tray, or a flattened piece of clay. Carefully apply paint to the surface of your drawing. Try to keep the paint out of the lines you have drawn. Place a sheet of paper over the painted surface, and gently rub the back of the paper to transfer the paint. Peel your sheet of paper back – and voilà! – you’ve made a print!