

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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Edgar Degas in the Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago -- Examination of Selected Pastels

Degas's pastels are problematic for conservators, not only in their baffling makeup, but also in their methods of attachment. The pastels include many layering, fixing, and steaming techniques, as well as media such as gouache, l'essence, and some unidentified liquid thinning agents. Moreover, the examined pastels have an attached sheet and are often wrapped and glued to a board; a wooden stretcher was found on only one work in our collection. Whether or not to remove an original mount is a decision complicated by the information that the original attachment provides which is important to understanding Degas's use of materials. The conservator must take action with mounts which are less stable than others. In the pastels by Degas in the Art Institute of Chicago, we have found an unusual number of original mounts which we have tried to maintain. Only works in serious condition have been freed. In this paper, I will discuss treatment measures taken in the Paper Conservation Laboratory at the Art Institute, along with some insights into Degas's working methods gained by using the stereo microscope and infrared vidicon.

Preparation for the Class (formerly Dancers in the Wings), 1882/85

Inscribed recto, lower right, in black pastel: Degas

Pastel on ivory laid paper

Max. 648 x 497 mm

Bequest of Mr. & Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson, 1937.1032

Preparation for the Class (1882/85) fig.1 was attached on the perimeter to a secondary sheet of poor quality wood pulp paper and stretched on a wooden stretcher. Paper breaks and distorting corner stress were what made us decide to free the work from its tension support. Our work was complicated by the fact that pastel extended onto the secondary sheet, and it was difficult to determine whether these passages are by Degas.

Although the color on the perimeter is very different in appearance and application from that in the body of the work, any conservation measures affecting what is potentially original were of critical concern. With this in mind, my choice, a conservative one, was to leave these passages intact when freeing the pastel. This was done by cutting into the secondary paper on the wooden stretcher's side using a surgical scalpel

The secondary paper's unattached sections were removed while the pastel rested faceup on a foam board support with a hole cut in it. The embrittled secondary paper was removed one section at a time while keeping the pastel safe and flat. All secondary paper edges were left undisturbed, maintaining all passages of the pastel intact. Noted in examination were some



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

small, dark spots of glistening material near the area of the signature, thought to be traces of fixative

In early examinations, we used infrared vidicon which revealed some changes Degas had made. The right arm of the central dancer and the left arm of the dancer on the right were repositioned, from straight to bent, fig.2.

Harlequin, 1885

Inscribed recto, lower left, in brown pastel: Degas/85
Pastel on cream laid paper, pieced at bottom and right
Max. 645 x 578 mm (bottom piece 50 x 578 mm; side piece
645 x 115 mm)
Bequest of Loula D. Lasker, 1962.74

Harlequin(1885) fig.3 was under great stress on its perimeter attachment to a heavy mount board made concave by climate changes over many years. In examination, the work was found to have an overall backing paper wrapped around and adhered to the board's back. Degas added paper strips on the drawing sheet's bottom and right margins. Great stress on the entire package, and the suspicion that the seams of the paper additions could be areas of potential weakness caused much concern for the work's safety. Several areas of foxing were found in the figure; these were the type that entwine and cling to the pastel's layered portions. This condition was the basis for the decision to remove the pastel from its mount board. Upon examination, the secondary paper on the mount's side was determined to be free and was clearly the best point at which to begin the removal. The removal was carried out by cutting along the side using a surgical scalpel. When freed, the drawing was lifted away from the curved mount board. The mold on the board was dimensional, although it appeared to be inactive. The secondary support was found to be an overall attachment of pale blue laid paper.

Raking light revealed two identical watermarks, one on the large drawing sheet, the other on an added strip. The primary sheet and added strips are a peach or pink color. The paper, Michallet, also was used for the roughly contemporary Preparation for the Class.

L'Etoile(The Star), 1879/81

Inscribed recto, lower right, in brown pastel: Degas
Pastel on cream wove paper, wrapped around board, perimeter attachment
Max. 733 x 574 mm
Bequest of Mrs. Diego Suarez, 1980.414

With only a cursory examination of L'Etoile(1880) fig.4 it is clear that this work is not in such an extremely taut condition as the others just discussed. Unlike all the other works, which are perimeter attachments, this example does not appear to have any secondary paper attachment. It is wrapped around the board, taped and glued to the back on all four edges. When the pastel was moved during examination, the play in the sheet also was found to be much greater than in the works just discussed. Infrared vidicon



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

examination uncovered a closed fan on the young dancer's wrist, fig. 5. Vertical waves in the sheet are seen in raking light, which also reveals a small tear in the upper left-hand corner. It looks to have been caused by a nail once holding the work in its frame. Since its condition is less stressful, we decided to leave the pastel and mount board intact. The framed pastel is monitored regularly and will be removed from its mount, if necessary.

Ballet at the Paris Opéra, 1877

Inscribed recto, lower left, in white pastel: Degas
Pastel over monotype on cream laid paper
Plate 352 x 706 mm; Sheet 359 x 719 mm
Gift of Mary and Leigh Block, 1981.12

Ballet at the Paris Opéra (1877) fig.6 recently has been discovered to be pastel over monotype. It had been attached to a mount board. Eugenia Parry Janis, in her catalog of Degas's monotypes, helps us understand the artist's much-used printing process (Eugenia Parry Janis, Degas Monotypes: Essay, Catalogue & Checklist, Harvard University, Fogg Art Museum, 1968, p.xvii). Monotypes are created by taking an impression from a drawing in printer's ink on a plate. The technique involves two basic approaches: the subtractive method, or "dark-field manner", in which the drawing is made by covering the plate entirely with ink and wiping some of it away to make a design; and the additive method, or "light-field manner", in which the drawing is made by direct application with a brush or rag of ink to a clean plate. Often, Degas was known to have pulled a second, weaker monotype impression and then to have worked on both impressions with pastel. This is a fine example of Degas's great interest in combining the two media. A plate mark is seen on the sheet's sides and lower margin; the print's upper margin has been trimmed into the plate and a black chalk line has been added at the top edge, possibly to simulate the missing plate mark.

In examination, numerous areas of foxing were found in the greens and browns. This condition, along with the mount board's poor quality and close proximity to the work, made it a candidate for removal from the mount. The work was freed from its perimeter attachment by cutting into the board's side beneath the sheet. There are tightly clustered foxing patterns that relate to the pastel used for the dancer's hair. Foxing on the back of the sheet corresponds to the mount's dimensional mold growth. The foxing was observed for several months; although no activity was seen during this period, Ballet at the Paris Opéra and other problematic works were provided with thymol strips in their mats to arrest future foxing conditions.

Removing the pastel from its mount made a more thorough examination possible. Transmitted light provided much information about the monoprint and its relationship to the added pastel. No second impression of the monotype is known for Ballet at the Paris Opéra. However, given the monoprint's sketchy execution, it seems reasonable to conclude that Degas intended from the beginning to complete the image with added pastel. Transmitted light clarifies the artist's monotype technique. The "dark-field" or subtractive method can be seen clearly in the sharp lines that render foliage on the stage set in the upper left corner, fig. 7. The right side



Fig. 5

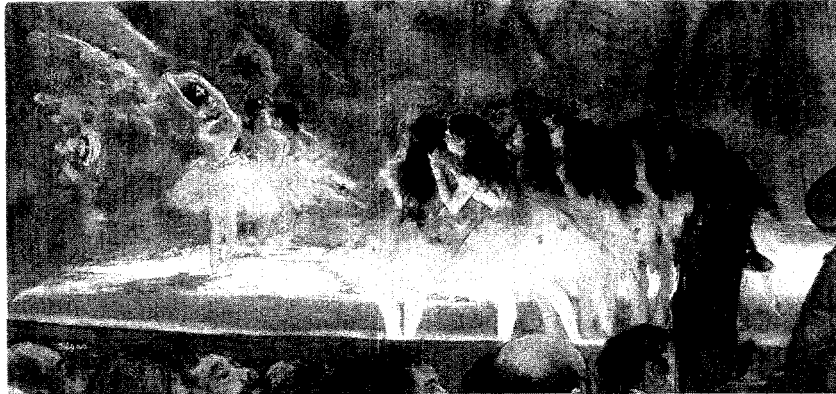


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

has several passages that seem to have been changed from the plate's original composition. Transmitted light shows that the dancers' legs had been completely wiped from the plate; and the stage's foreground and the upper right of the plate also appear to have been partially wiped in the "dark-field" manner. The repositioned bass fiddle seems to have been drawn in the "light-field" technique, as evidenced by the linear approach in the final form. Also noted was the shortening of the dancers' heads achieved through the application of green pastel.

In the left side of the work, areas in the dancers' costumes and in the floor beneath them were not penetrated by transmitted light, suggesting the addition of some liquid medium such as gouache. Raking light shows the layering and brushstrokes of this heavily worked area and the vigorous additions Degas made. These two examination techniques confirmed the dimensional additions to this area.

The Bathers, 1895/1905

Pastel and charcoal on tracing paper/paper/board package on board

Max. 104.6 x 108.3 cm (middle sheet max. 65.8 x 108.3 cm, top sheet max. 19.3 x 108.3 cm, bottom sheet max. 19.3 x 108.3 cm)

Gift of Nathan Cummings, 1955.495

The Bathers (1895/1905) fig.8 is a large, late work executed on tissue paper, mounted overall to a second white paper, and pasted down to a board. "Unfortunately, we do not know enough about how Degas mounted his tracing paper drawings onto board. A label on the back of the mount reads: 'encadrements/19 rue Fontaine/Adam Dupré,' which suggests that he sent the partially traced sheet of paper to these framers with instructions that it be mounted as he specified," (Richard R. Brettell and Suzanne Folds McCullagh, Degas in the Art Institute of Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago and Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1984, p.190). A large sheet of the thin paper is pasted in the board's middle section, and two smaller strips are attached overall at the work's top and bottom. The large central sheet appears most complete, while the bottom section clearly is unfinished. The three sheets are carefully butt-joined, and raking light shows only a few puckers. These are areas where the pastel was not applied or could be the result of uneven pressure when the tracing paper/paper/board package was prepared. This thin paper takes on a glistening quality when raking light is moved from side to side near it. By testing a corner, we concluded that glistening was a fixative. A small application of alcohol was made with a "ooo" sable brush and allowed to dry. Examining the area with ultraviolet light shows a subtle ring, indicating that surface material moved with the tiny alcohol application. Although most of the pastel's colors look powdery, those blues in the top left appear slightly darker and glisten in raking light. Many areas look rubbed or burnished. Portions of water and sky were boldly achieved with the side application of pastel stick. The color sits on the high points of the paper, creating a scattered color surface with most low places maintaining the tone of yellowed tissue over white paper. The charcoal figure on the left has clearly visible erased areas in the hair.

This technique closely resembles the subtractive method that Degas used in his monoprints, substantiating the use of this technique in another medium.

The methods of mounting Degas's pastels described here have been observed in other major collections. Although similar in many basic components, each work and its mount is a unique problem. The dilemma of when to alter such mounts and when to leave them intact will continue. It is my hope that these pastels and conservation treatments will generate a dialogue among conservators. Our continuing attention to such concerns can help create the greater understanding we need in order to deal with conservation problems related to pastel.

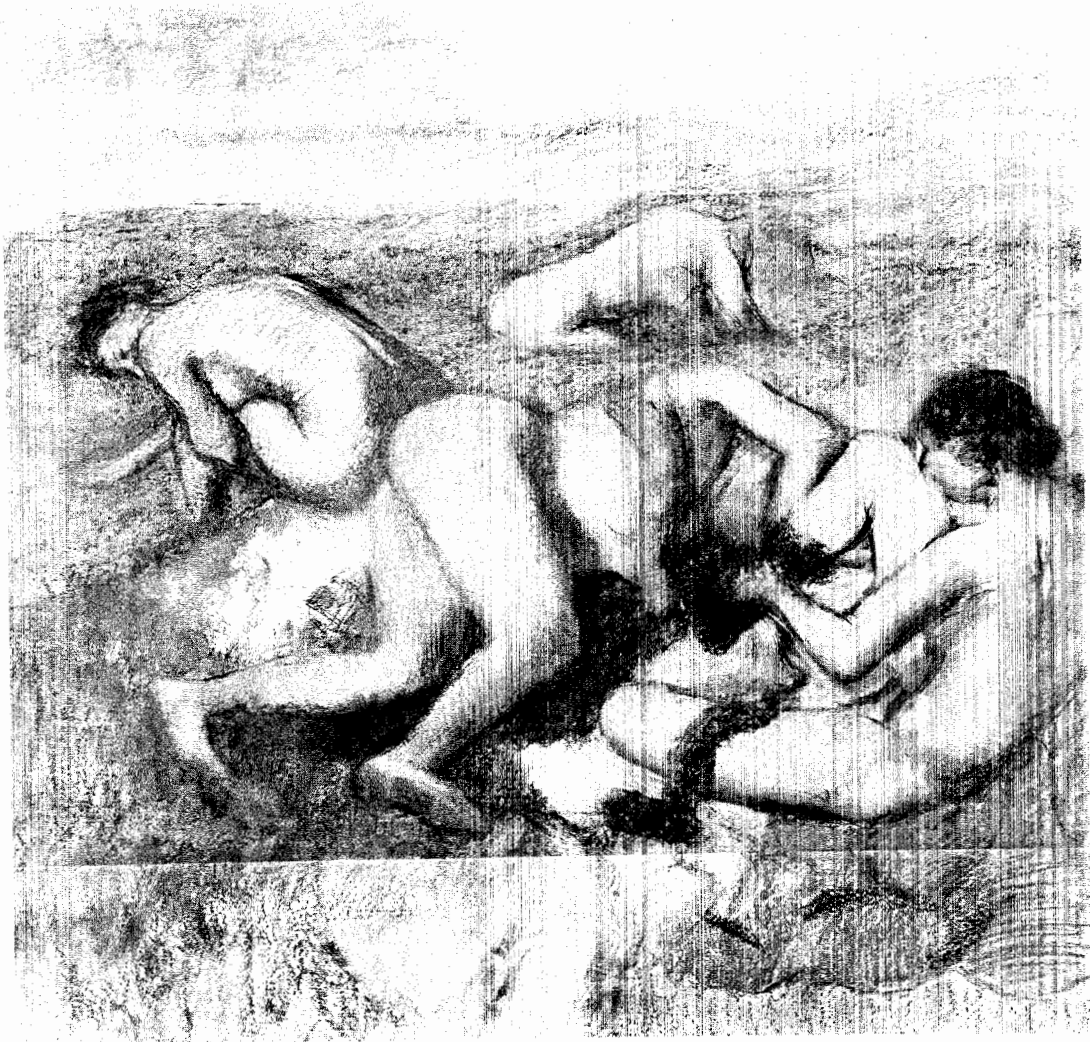


Fig. 8

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