

Degas at the DAM

The Denver Art Museum is the sole American venue for *Degas: A Passion for Perfection*, showcasing the prolific French artist's works from 1855 to 1906. Visitors will get an intimate look into his creative process as well as his life.

By Laurie Dunklee

Degas is best known for his paintings of ballet dancers, but his palette of subjects was much broader, as was his range of artistic mediums. *Degas: A Passion for Perfection*, at the Denver Art Museum through May 20, opens our view of the famous artist and his personality. The exhibition covers a period of 60 years and includes Degas's early historical scenes, his studies of horses, and his fascination with the nude—as well as his most familiar depictions of dancers.

"This exhibition is all about what people don't know about Degas," said Timothy Standing, Gates Family Foundation Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the DAM. The more than 100 works on display include paintings, drawings, pastels, etchings, monotype and bronze sculptures.

The presentation also serves as an introduction to the man behind the art. "Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was a man and an artist full of contradictions," Standing said. "He was artistically radical, yet politically conservative. He had some training but could also claim to be self-taught. Fiercely independent, he exhibited with the Impressionists but refused to be labeled as one."

A man of contradictions

The contradictions in Degas's life and work come to light in his own writings, splashed on the gallery walls, including this quote: "I should like to be famous and unknown."

"Crude and often cold, Degas was known as a curmudgeon with a sharp wit," said



Left: *Woman Combing her Hair*, about 1887-90. Charcoal and red chalk on tracing paper. Right: *At the Café*, about 1875-77. Degas' focus on the women's conversation is evident in his sketchy rendering of the foreground and the moving crowd in the background.



Elisabeth de Valois, after Anthonis Mor, about 1865-70. Degas learned by studying the great masters. The source for his drawing, right, was likely a portrait by Anthonis Mor

(about 1517-1577), left. Degas applied different pressure with black chalk, turning and working it into the fiber of the paper to enhance the interplay of light and shadow.

Standing. "But he was also a poet, once writing that dancers had sewn his heart 'into a pink satin bag, slightly faded satin, like their ballet shoes.'"

Degas's artistic journey becomes evident as the visitor walks through the exhibition. From his early studies to his masterworks, Degas's various motifs emerge. "He studied the old masters and even copied their paintings," said Standing. "He studied figures, as all the artists did, at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, and his first nudes are on display here. We see some of his plein air [outside] work, including small panels depicting the family villa in Naples."

Horses, especially the movements of horses, were a fascination for Degas. He studied early films of running horses and captured the movement in bronze sculptures and paintings of races. "He was interested in movement, not static images," said Christoph Heinrich, Frederick and Jan Mayer Director of the DAM.

Capturing the moment

His "bathing women" series, including works in pastels, charcoal and bronze sculpture, was intended to convey not only movement but



Above: *At the Races: The Start*, 1860-62. Degas positioned small wooden horses on a board to help him make sketches for oil paintings. "You can't turn live horses around to get the proper effects of light," he wrote. Right: Bronze horses originally wax-modeled in the 1870s-1880s and cast posthumously in the 1920s.

immediacy. "He was capturing the moment; he was not interested in the next 150 years of viewers," said Standing. "But it speaks to how infectious these works are, that we still talk about them."

Degas was an innovator who experimented constantly with his materials and techniques. "He blurred the boundaries of traditional media and pushed them to extremes," said Standing. "In order to imitate flat Italian painting, he invented an oil medium known as *l'essence*, in which the oils in oil pigment are leached out and then mixed together with paint thinner. Sometimes he used oils like watercolor, making them liquid-y, or he added water or oil to pastels, to blur the line between painting and drawing."

Degas experimented extensively with monotype printmaking, in which pigment is applied to a smooth plate and then transferred to paper using a printing press. He frequently reworked the printed images with pastels. "Later in his life his family needed money, so he produced and sold a number of monotypes," said Standing.



The Tub, original wax modeled about 1889, cast posthumously in 1920. Degas' bathing women series allowed him to explore movement and experiment with technique.

A restless artist

The artist repeated his subjects—horses, bathers, dancers—again and again, continually experimenting and making adjustments. "The viewer is engaged in his process," Standing said. "He was obsessed with the repetition of making; he did not want to stop. He was a restless artist—never satisfied and never finished. Perfection, defined only on his terms—was a constant pursuit and elusive reward."

Visitors enter the exhibition's final, ballet-themed gallery

through a mirrored hallway with a barre (handrail), evoking a dance studio. The showing includes some of Degas' most iconic images, including *Dance Examination* (in the DAM collection), the large-scale *Dancer with Bouquets* and *The Dancing Lesson*, an example of his pastel-over-monotype technique.

"He was interested in the reality of the dancers' experiences, not just the fantasy," said Standing. "Like Degas, his dancers dealt in contradictions—beauty and pain, grace and vulgarity, playfulness and discipline."

For more information and tickets, see denverartmuseum.org or call 720.865.5000.



Dance Examination, 1880. Degas captures the moment when two dancers are about to audition. One adjusts her stocking, while the other focuses on positioning her legs and feet.

Degas (right) bids visitors an exuberant farewell from a life-size vinyl blow-up as they exit the exhibition. "He could be snarky but endearing to some friends," says curator Standing.



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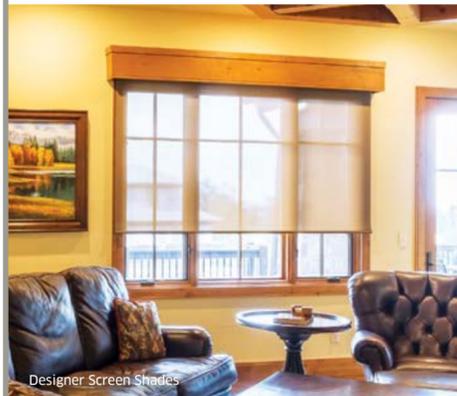
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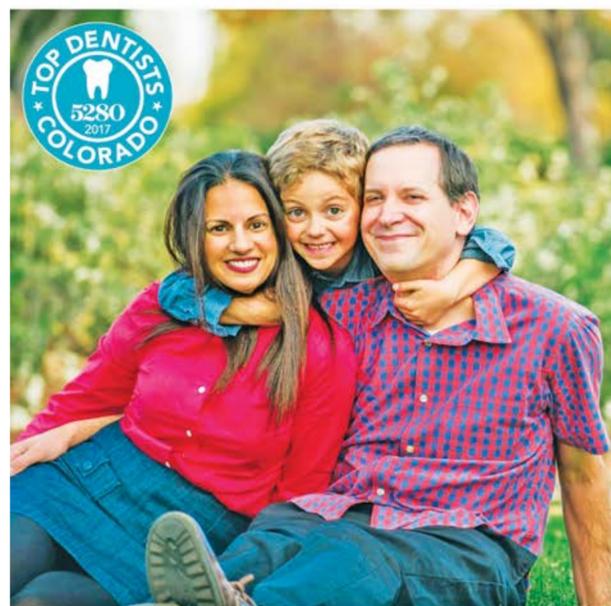
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