Degas’s “Misogyny”*

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In response to a series of nudes at their toilette, pastels exhibited by Degas at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886, the contemporary novelist and critic J.-K. Huysmans initiated what has since become an established convention in the Degas literature: that of seeing personal malevolence as the unavoidable implication of Degas’s rejection of feminine stereotypes. Although Huysmans was not unsympathetic to the iconoclasm that had impelled Degas to substitute “real, living, denuded flesh” for “the smooth and slippery flesh of ever nude goddesses,” he could see no other motivation for this iconoclasm than a personal desire on the artist’s part to “humiliate” and “debase” his subjects. Degas, he maintained, had “brought an attentive cruelty and a patient hatred to bear upon his studies of nudes.”

Since the notion of Degas’s “misogyny” was thus given its classic literary formulation in the late nineteenth century by writers like Huysmans and Paul Valéry, few scholars have expressed discomfort with this label, and none has stopped to evaluate its sources or to question directly its validity. In 1962, for example, the appearance of Jean Sutherland Boggs’s perceptive study of Degas’s portraits revealed aspects of this artist’s response to women, both in his art and in his life, that should have cast serious doubt upon the old accusation of “misogyny.” Although certainly preparing the way for a re-evaluation of this entire question, Boggs herself refrained from attacking the issue directly, permitting herself only the somewhat tentative comment that Degas, in his portraits of women, “could be enchanted, affectionate, perceptive in a way that suggests that his reputed misogyny was an affectation.”

Nor have the implications of Boggs’s observations been taken up elsewhere, and despite the recognition that her book received, the pro-misogyny literature continued to flourish throughout the 1960’s and seventies. Thus, for example, in 1963, Benedict Nicolson was still troubled by the old misogyny question. In a reappraisal of Degas’s difficult and complex personality—a reappraisal that was on the whole sympathetic—Nicolson strove to avoid the one-sided approach that has been traditionally used in dealing with the question of Degas’s attitudes toward women. In the end, however, Nicolson accepted the convention that our social norms have helped to establish in the art-historical literature: “Even from Degas’s pictures,” he wrote, “a bewildering indifference to the grace of women emerges . . . It is not that he treats a woman as though she were a horse: he treats her with more savagery.”

Two years later, in 1965, the misogyny theme was revived with a vengeance by Quentin Bell in his interpretation of Degas’s Le Viol; and, as late as 1972, Theodore Reff published in these pages an important study on this same painting, a study in which the assumption of Degas’s misogyny continued to play a key role.

Thus, the late nineteenth-century idea of Degas’s personal dislike for women has achieved, in our own century, the status of a commonplace. Fed and apparently supported by contemporary accounts of the artist’s irascible temper and unpredictable social behavior, it has been seized upon by critics and historians and applied as an interpretive key to a great number of his works. Almost invariably, the reasoning that has been invoked has been circular: Degas’s misogyny has been assumed, his paintings have been interpreted accordingly, and they have then been held up as proof of the original assumption. As a result, many of his pictures have presented perplexing problems in interpretation to art historians, all too many of whom seem inadvertently to be approaching these works as though they were Rorschach tests. Thus, for example, a picture of the early 1870’s, the so-called Bouderie, which means “Pouting” or “Sulking” (Fig. 1; L. 335), was first described in print in the 1890’s as a portrait grouping, “a scene of affectionate intimacy.” In 1910, the critic G. Lecomte gave it the unfortunate title under which it has labored ever since, and in 1923 Meier-Graefe decided that what the picture really represented was a husband who was angry with his wife. Similar methods of interpretation have plagued a paint-

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* This article grew out of a paper that was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in Washington, D.C., in January of 1975.
2 For examples of the pictures that prompted Huysmans’s commentary, see Nos. 847 and 872 (Fig. 18 below) in the four-volume catalogue of Degas’s work by P.-A. Lemoisne, Degas et son oeuvre, Paris, 1946–49. Works herein catalogued will be cited below as L., with number.
3 Valéry, who met Degas in the early 1890’s, described the artist’s gift for mimicry, citing his particularly vivid imitation, upon one occasion, of a woman whom he had observed going through the fussy and repetitive ritual of getting herself settled on a tram. “He was charmed with it,” Valéry reported. adding: “There was an element of misogyny in his enjoyment” (P. Valéry, “Degas, Dance, Drawing,” The Complete Works of Paul Valéry, xi, trans. D. Paul, New York, 1960, 56).
4 J. S. Boggs, Portraits by Degas, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962, 31. Prompted by a similar intuition, Eugenia Janis later wrote: “Denis Rouart (Monotypes, 1948, 1–10) and Camille Maclair (Degas, Heinemann, London, 15–16), have emphasized the beast-like qualities of Degas’s prostitutes and have seen in them examples of Degas’s supposed misogyny. They seem to have missed the humor in these women, who are ugly creatures, but comic, waiting for or administering to their clients. Even at their most obscene, they are caricatures of obscenity” (E. P. Janis, Degas Monotypes, Fogg Art Museum, 1968, xx).
6 Q. Bell, Degas: Le Viol (Charlton Lectures on Art), Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1965.
8 See the review of the literature on this painting compiled by C. Sterling and M. M. Salinger, French Paintings, A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ill, XIX–XX Centuries, Greenwich, Conn., 1967, 72–73.
ing that Degas himself reportedly referred to in neutral terms as “Scène d’Intérieur” or “mon tableau de genre,” but to which subsequent writers have preferred to attach a more explicit and melodramatic title, Le Viol, interpreting the scene as the aftermath of a violent rape (Fig. 2; L. 348). Recently, efforts to find a literary source for Degas’s Scène d’intérieur have culminated in Theodore Reff’s suggestion of Emile Zola’s novel, Thérèse Raquin. Described by Reff as the “decoration of a married yet utterly estranged couple, doomed to live together closely yet without intimacy,” this is a story in which Degas, we are told, “would have seen projected powerfully his deepest, most disturbing feelings about marriage and the relations of the sexes.”

Thus, the fin-de-siècle “attentive cruelty” and “patient hatred” attributed to Degas by Huysmans have taken on, in the twentieth century, predictably Freudian overtones, to become a general “fear and suspicion of women” that writers have endeavored to connect with Degas’s formative experiences. Reff has written in this vein: “Significantly, the first marriage he had been able to observe closely, his mother having died when he was young, was the singularly unhappy one of an aunt and an uncle whom he portrayed in 1860, after living in their household.” The painting here referred to, La Famille Bellelli (Fig. 3; L. 79), is further associated by Reff, as a seminal work, with a group of five other pictures also of the 1860’s and the early seventies. This group is composed not only of the Scène d’intérieur (Fig. 2), but also a second Scène d’intérieur (L. 41), Bouderie (Fig. 1), the Petites filles spartiates provoquant des garçons (Fig. 9; L. 70), and Les Malheurs de la ville d’Orléans (Fig. 8; L. 124). All of these pictures are said to depict situations of alienation or aggression between the sexes, expressive of or in some way dependent upon the artist’s own alleged “fear and suspicion” of the opposite sex. According to the earlier analysis of Quentin Bell, which is accepted and enlarged upon by Reff, these pictures share not only a common theme but also the same “psychomorphic design” that gives visual form to the artist’s perhaps “unconscious” intent. “In all of these pictures,” Bell writes, “the left is, so to speak, the female side to the canvas—it is separated from the right by a central element, across which Degas sets a unifying diagonal.” Speaking in particular of the Petites filles spartiates, Bouderie, and Les Malheurs, he writes: “In these three paintings, the element of hostility between the sexes is apparent.” Of the three, however, he holds Les Malheurs to be the most revealing because it is the most “explicit.” “Protected,” Bell writes, “by the conventions of academic art, Degas shows his hand, for this is unashamedly a scene of murder, torture and rape.”

In the discussion that follows, we will re-examine some of these widely held critical attitudes by taking a fresh look at a number of the works, considering them anew within their social and personal contexts as well as from the point of view of the art-historical traditions to which they belong. Once we have made an effort to approach these works freshly, without allowing the preconception of misogynistic motivation to limit and guide our responses, a very different picture from the one commonly presented will emerge, not only of Degas’s attitudes and motives but also of his art.

Such an effort at reinterpretation, despite the foundation laid by Bogs, is long overdue in the Degas literature. And it is well worth making, for upon it hinges not only our understanding of a major oeuvre, but an important problem in methodology as well. The dual nature of this problem, which is sociological as well as art-historical, is perhaps best suggested at the outset by considering an observation made by one of Degas’s own contemporaries, Georges Rivière, who met the artist around 1875 and who was also a good friend of Renoir’s. Commenting upon the complexity of Degas’s character, Rivière pointed to something that struck him as a perplexing contradiction, but that we can perhaps now recognize may not be a contradiction at all. Degas, wrote Rivière, was an artist

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8 Reff, 324.
9 The phrases quoted are Reff’s, 324 and 326.
10 Bell, unpaginated [12–14].
who depicted women without flattery. Yet, to his own surprise, Rivière felt compelled to observe:

Degas enjoyed the company of women. He, who often depicted them with real cruelty, derived great pleasure from being with them, enjoyed their conversation and produced pleasing phrases for them. This attitude presented a curious contrast to that of Renoir. The latter, though he painted women seductively, endowing with charm even those who did not possess it, generally experienced little pleasure from the things they valued. He was interested in women, with few exceptions, only if they were likely to become his models. 11

Unlike Renoir, Degas, with his uncompromisingly contemporary images of women—seen at their toilette or at their work in theaters, laundries, millinery shops, or brothels—stripped away idealized conventions, thereby challenging some of the most cherished myths of his society. It is not surprising that that society would have been, at the very least, unsettled by this “cruel” and threatening iconoclasm, and inclined to dismiss it, defensively, as the product of some personal maladjustment or malevolence on the artist’s part. It is instructive for us to recall in this regard that during the nineteenth century the playwright Ibsen was also called a misogynist by his contemporaries. But whereas our colleagues in literary criticism have long since reexamined this label and set it into its historical context, the analogous accusation in the Degas literature has never been directly challenged. The reluctance of art historians in our own century to reconsider this accusation of misogyny as a function of the social conventions and biases of Degas’s period is puzzling. But it may well result from the fact that these conventions and biases are ones that our own society to some extent still shares and endeavors to perpetuate. Thus, from the point of view of the methodology of our discipline, the problem of Degas’s “reputed misogyny” may offer us a sobering example of how assumptions held by society at large can compromise scholarly objectivity, obscuring from us, in this instance, the intentions and perceptions of a major artist and distorting our assessment of a significant aspect of his work.

Although Degas’s mother died in 1847 when he was thirteen years old, his large family provided a number of female figures to whom he could relate in his youth and whom he seems to have observed with extraordinary sympathy and understanding. These female relatives, including two sisters and several aunts and cousins, were the sitters for many of his early portraits, works of great psychological acumen, which often convey the peculiar tensions and problems of personality that might have resulted, either directly or indirectly, from the sitters’ positions as women in their society.

The formidable yet singularly poignant figure of Degas’s aunt Laura, for example, dominates the group portrait that is among the most ambitious and important of his early works, La Famille Bellelli (Fig. 3), a painting not completed until late in 1860 but begun by Degas during the nearly nine months that he spent in Florence as the guest of his aunt and uncle, from August 1858 to early April 1859. 12 For this still naïve and romantic young man, who confided to his travel diary just days before arriving in Florence his dream of one day finding “une bonne petite femme simple, tranquille, qui comprenne mes folies d’esprit et avec qui je passe une vie modeste dans le travail,” 13 the experience of living as an intimate in the strained and unhappy Bellelli household would indeed have provided a sobering revelation. Degas’s awareness of his relatives’ marital difficulties is established not only by documents, 14 but also by the portrait that he painted of them with their two daughters, a work that reveals his remarkable sensitivity to the subtle pressures and tensions that existed within this family unit. 15 If we are to believe, however, that the example of this difficult relationship had upon Degas the effects that have been claimed for it—helping to induce in him a permanent “fear and suspicion of women” in general—then we would be forced to assume that in painting the Bellelli family portrait, Degas himself personally identified in some way with the recessive and isolated figure of his uncle. Although the compositional arrangement of the picture does effectively communicate Degas’s perception of his aunt and uncle’s emotional estrangement, there is really nothing in the portrait itself that might tell us conclusively and objectively on which side Degas’s own sympathies lay—if, indeed, he did take sides. Certainly, the more complete of the two characterizations is that of the Baroness, Degas’s aunt on his father’s side, of whom, reportedly, he was very fond. 16

Proud and severe, she is shown here pregnant and in mourning for her own recently deceased father, spatially and emotionally isolated from the husband whose life of nomadic political exile she had for many years shared. 17

Further insight into the effects that marriages in his own family may have had upon Degas in his youth is provided by still another portrait of a married couple that the artist painted a few years later, in 1865. This is the double portrait of Degas’s own sister, Thérèse, and her husband, Edmond Morbilli, the Italian cousin whom she had married in 1863 (Fig. 4; L. 164). Here, as a young man, Degas had an opportunity to observe close up the complexities of another
type of marital relationship, and this time his concern for the effects that that relationship may have had upon the personality of the woman involved is unmistakable. As Jean Boggs has observed, we know very little about Thérèse De Gas beyond what her brother's portraits may tell us of her. But these, and in particular the double portrait of 1865, tell us a remarkable amount. The position assigned to Thérèse in this grouping, seated behind her husband with one hand placed tentatively upon his shoulder, immediately suggests the dependent nature of her relationship to him. At the same time, the startled, almost frightened expression imparted to her face by the staring, widened eyes and the defensive placement of her hand before her slightly parted lips bespeak her timidity in relation to the outside world, a world from which she literally seeks to shield herself by retreating physically behind the imposing and self-assured figure of her protective husband. In a slightly earlier portrait of his sister by Degas, which was probably painted just before her marriage (Fig. 5; L. 109), Thérèse is seen as a far more imposing and stable figure. Her posture and facial expression convey, relatively speaking, a measure of dignity and composure. And although her latent shyness may be suggested, as Boggs notes, by a detail like the hand that emerges tentatively from her voluminous shawl, this aspect of her personality is not stressed. It is fully revealed to us for the first time, grown now manifestly into a state of almost pitiable timidity and uncer-
tainty—as it was perhaps first fully revealed to her brother as well—by the marital relationship that forms the real subject of the double portrait.18

In the same year, 1865, Degas painted another striking family portrait, this one, of his American aunt Mme. Michel Mussôn and her two daughters, Désirée and Estelle (Fig. 6).19 Relatives of the artist on his mother’s side, they had left their home in New Orleans in 1862 to take refuge in Paris during the American Civil War. Degas’s intimate and revealing portrait study conveys with remarkable poignancy the unhappiness and listless inertia of these three women. It conveys as well his sympathetic response to their loneliness and their plight—in particular, the plight of his cousin Estelle, a war widow with a posthumous child. His special and life-long compassion for this sad and dependent figure is already suggested in this grouping, where she is distinguished closely by her frontal placement and by her darker mourning costume. It is conveyed more directly by the individual portrait that Degas painted of his cousin at about the same time, a portrait in which he focuses closeup on her small and bewildered face, made even more movingly lonely,” as Boggs has observed, “by the background of barren trees” that rise beyond (Fig. 7).20

The sensitivity and sympathy manifested by Degas’s early portraits of his female relatives, so oddly at variance with the misogynistic impulse later attributed to him, are qualities that are no less apparent in the traditional subject pictures to which Degas devoted much of his effort during this same period, the 1850’s and early sixties.

A work of major interest in this regard—and, to date, the most problematic of all of Degas’s early history paintings—is the picture that Degas exhibited at the Salon of 1865 under the title Scène de guerre au moyen âge (Fig. 8). Even though subjects of the sort Degas depicted here were common coin in the nineteenth century among the Salon history painters whose ranks the young artist then aspired to join, nevertheless, the sufferings and maltreatment of the women and the cruelty of the men in this scene have often been emphasized by modern writers in the light of Degas’s misogynistic reputation. 21 The subject of the painting, however, has long been a matter for debate. Although exhibited in 1865 as Scène de guerre au moyen âge, the painting, which remained in Degas’s studio until his death, was listed in the catalogue of the first studio sale under a different title, Les Malheurs de la ville d’Orléans. The meaning of this second title, its origins, and Degas’s intent are questions that have long mystical scholars, who have been unable to find in the history of the city of Orléans any event that might explain or justify the scene that Degas depicts. 22 Recently, however, Hélène Adhémar has presented a hypothesis that convincingly dispels many of these problems and sheds important light for us upon the question of Degas’s motivation. 23 She has pointed first of all to the fact, revealed by X-rays, that the picture was repainted in several areas and that, originally, the horsemen wore hairstyles of a different historical period, suggesting that even though Degas first exhibited the picture as a medieval scene, he did not necessarily conceive it as that initially. She contends, further, that the puzzling title by which the picture is known today—Les Malheurs de la ville d’Orléans—may well have resulted from a misreading of a document in Degas’s studio identifying the picture as Les Malheurs de la Nîle Orléans, with the letters Nîle used as an abbreviation for the word Nouvelle—as they were in fact often similarly used in Degas’s letters. If the hypothesis preferred by Mme. Adhémar is correct—and the evidence she presents seems to weigh strongly in its favor—then the cruelties depicted by Degas in this scene would not have been the gratuitous inventions of a misogynistic imagination, as writers imply. They would have been, rather, a specific response on Degas’s part to a bit of contemporary history that personally involved and apparently deeply upset him: the historically verifiable atrocities to which the female population of the city of New Orleans had been subjected for a period during the American Civil War. These are, of course, events of which Degas would have had very immediate and disturbing first-hand reports, for they are the events that seem to have prompted the flight from New Orleans of his aunt and two cousins late in the year 1862.

Thus, although Degas’s motives for painting Les Malheurs may have been in part personal ones, they turn out to have been, in all probability, of a far different order from what has previously and generally been supposed. A bias similar to the one that has for so long helped to conceal this possibility from us has also affected and quite probably distorted the accepted art-historical interpretation of yet another of his early history paintings, a work of 1860, which the artist sent to the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition in 1880 with the title Petites filles spartiates provoquant des garçons (Spartan Girls Challenging the Boys) (Fig. 9).24 Here, once again, thematic choices can reveal to us much about the nature of Degas’s early response to women that has hitherto been obscured—in this instance, not only by our uncritical acceptance of the notion of Degas’s misogyny, but also by the culturally conditioned expectations that have helped to form and to limit our responses to the unusual subject with which Degas chose to deal.

The Petites filles spartiates is a picture to which the phrase “war of the sexes” has been applied by modern writers, who are wont to see in the work an unhealthy hostility be-

18 See Boggs, Portraits, 17.
between the sexes, reflecting what is supposed to be the artist’s insecurity and fear of women. For the precise action that Degas has depicted, however, no exact source has been identified, either in literature or in painting, that might help us to clarify the artist’s intent. A clue, nevertheless, to the nature of the challenge that is being issued in the picture is offered to us by a notation in one of Degas’s early notebooks, in which he referred to a scene of Spartan girls and boys wrestling together in a Classical setting. The theme in general, of course, is one that derives from the ancients, and Degas, who was well versed in the Classics, is said to have read about it in Plutarch. But although several Classical as well as contemporary authors did in fact describe—and, what is more, praise—the Spartan custom of encouraging young girls to exercise and wrestle among themselves in the sight of all the citizens including the young boys, none spoke of the particular action that Degas illustrated—the girls challenging the boys to wrestle. Nor does such a scene occur in the relatively few earlier, pictorial treatments of this subject, where, normally, young Spartans of the same sex are shown exercising together.

The action presented in Degas’s painting, then, would seem to have been largely of his own invention. And it is interesting that, drawn for his subject to an ancient society that, atypically, did not encourage passivity in young women, Degas chose for his painting a grouping that can suggest a situation of equality between the sexes and a confrontation that underscores—in what may well be interpreted as a perfectly natural and positive way—the aggressive and competitive spirit of these young girls. Given the limitations of the data available to us, such an interpretation of the Petites filles spartiates is certainly as defensible as the one that currently prevails in the literature on this painting, and the fact that no previous writer has chosen to suggest or to entertain it is revealing. For the contention that the action depicted here is a threatening or a hostile one, we have, in point of fact, only the word of subsequent art historians, whose interpretation in this instance may tell us far more about the art historians themselves—about their own social conditioning and sex-role expectations—than it does about either the artist or his subject.

That Degas himself was capable of entertaining a positive attitude toward the kind of action he depicted in the Petites filles spartiates may be suggested by another of his early history paintings, the Sémiramis construisant une ville, upon which he stopped work around 1861 (Fig. 10, L. 82).

25 The phrase “war of the sexes” is Bell’s, Degas: Le Viol, [13]; see also Pool, 310.
Here, as in the *Petites filles spartiates*, Degas dealt with a subject that was without pictorial precedent and that seems to have depended instead upon his own interpretation of original written sources.\(^9\)

In approaching the subject of Semiramis, Degas, we should note, had two distinct historical traditions from which to choose. Whereas most Classical sources had described Semiramis as a beneficent empress and founder of Babylon, praising her for her brilliant military exploits and her building activities throughout the Empire, in the fifth century, the Christian historian Orosius had discarded this view, presenting instead the image of an evil and licentious conqueror, a *femme fatale*, who finally met her ruin when she attempted to marry her own son.\(^9\) The latter view of Semiramis prevailed throughout the Middle Ages, and it was predictably popular in the Romantic Period. In the late eighteenth century it informed the popular tragedy by Voltaire, which, in turn, inspired the libretto for the well-known opera by Rossini. This opera, *Semiramide*, with libretto by Rossi, was produced in Paris in 1858, and again in 1860 as *Sémiramide*, with the Rossi libretto translated by Méry into French.\(^1\)

Though certainly current, then, and readily available to Degas, the view of Semiramis as evil seductress is, significantly, not the one that interested Degas when he painted his own image of the Queen, whom he shows standing with her retinue on a terrace above a river, serenely contemplating the panoramic cityscape below. Degas’s image belongs to the tradition of Semiramis as builder, a tradition derived from the writings of the Classical authors, particularly Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily. Diodorus, who called Semiramis “the most renowned of all women of whom we have any record,” and who devoted seventeen chapters in his *Bibliotheca historica* to her, is our most important source and probably Degas’s as well. His detailed description of the building of Babylon contains one passage in particular that, it has been suggested, may have stirred Degas’s pictorial imagination. Semiramis, he wrote, “built two palaces on the very banks of the river, one at each end of the bridge, her intention being that from them she might be able to look down over the entire city and to have the keys as it were to its most important sections.” Her desire to found the great city of Babylon is ascribed by Diodorus to her “nature,” which, he says, “made her eager for great exploits and ambitious to surpass the fame of her predecessor.”\(^2\) All in all, the character he evokes—a character apparently attractive and congenial to Degas—is that of a great woman who was a strong and beneficent ruler, a creator and builder who shaped places as well as events, and who left her mark for the general good upon a world over which she exercised control.

In both the *Petites filles spartiates* and the *Sémiramide*, Degas, as a young man, dealt thematically with aspects of behavior and personality in women that were normally not encouraged for them in his society. He presented, in historical terms, possibilities for female independence, and he extolled the creative powers of women—intellectual and artistic rather than biological. The attitudes that these pictures suggest—attitudes that already in his youth would have marked Degas as unusual—are attitudes that seem to have survived as he grew older, for Degas, in later years, apparently continued to value independence of spirit and creative accomplishment in women, and he was most likely to establish his own relationships with them on a basis of intellectual equality.

Among the women in his own social circle whom Degas chose to paint, many were well known among their friends for both their intelligence and their creative talent. Mme. Camus, for example, whom Degas painted twice in the late 1860’s (L. 207, 271), was an accomplished musician. Of her, Degas later wrote admiringly that she was a woman of great “energy,” who “makes decisions in the most forceful manner.”\(^3\) Another talented female friend whom Degas painted in the late 1860’s was Mlle. Marie Dihau (L. 172, 263), a professional musician and singer, whose brother, Désiré, was bassoonist at the Paris Opéra.\(^4\) And in 1866, Degas painted the portrait of Victoria Dubourg, another woman whom he appears to have admired and whom he interpreted pictorially in a remarkably straightforward and sympathetic way (Fig. 11; L. 137). Daughter of a painter, and herself a painter (largely of floral still lives), Victoria Dubourg exhibited from time to time at the Salon from 1869 on, and, according to a contemporary, Georges Rivière, she was noted for her intelligence among the artists and writers in whose circle she moved.\(^5\) Boggs writes that “Degas painted her as sturdily built, uncomplicated in her movements, sensibly and for 1866 conservatively dressed in dull greenish brown, her hair simple, her face intelligent and wholesome.” In a portrait conspicuously lacking in the conventional trappings of feminine coquetry and grace, she leans forward naturally in her chair with her hands clasped firmly in front of her and her fore-arms resting solidly upon her thighs, her posture informal, her gaze direct. In later years, Victoria Dubourg was also painted by her husband, Fantin-Latour, whom she married in

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\(^2\) Kunin, 25. Kunin convincingly challenges the often repeated contention of L. Browne that Degas’s picture simply reproduces a scene from the current production of the Rossini-Méry *Sémiramide*, specifically, the scene at the beginning of the second act where Semiramis and a chorus of women await the arrival of Arsaces (L. Browne, *Degas Dancers*, New York, 1949, 20, 50). With the aid of the libretto, Kunin points out that not only is the charged and dramatic mood of that scene out of keeping with the contemplative mood of Degas’s picture, but that, also, in the description of the setting for this scene (specified in the libretto as the Hanging Gardens), no mention is made of the river and cityscape that figure so prominently in Degas’s composition (Kunin, 23–25).


\(^6\) Rivière, 116, 121.
1876. And, as Boggs further points out, Degas's portrait presents us with "a far warmer and healthier image of her than the wan impression Fantin gave in painting her" during the years of their marriage that followed.36

Among Degas's small circle of friends, the woman with whom he seems to have enjoyed the closest and most durable friendship was of course Mary Cassatt. Cassatt could apparently withstand Degas's abrasive wit far more than most women—or, for that matter, most men—of his acquaintance. She was a person with whom he could debate the nature of "style," and she was an artist whose draftsmanship he praised and admired. In the early 1880's, Degas painted a portrait of Mary Cassatt in a pose that is, once again, conspicuously lacking in conventional grace, a pose very similar to the one that he had chosen many years earlier for his portrait of Victoria Dubourg—another woman of intelligence and spirit who was a painter (Fig. 12; L. 796). Her expression, however, is withdrawn and pensive, so that in depth and quality of feeling as well as in pose this portrait of Mary Cassatt is far more reminiscent of another earlier portrait by Degas, in this instance of a person very close to him: his aging father, whom he had painted around 1869 listening intently to the music of his friend Pagans (Fig. 13; L. 256). It is a formal echo that may in part be interpreted as an indication of the artist's affection and high regard for his sitter, whose outspoken manner and decisive opinions reportedly held great appeal for him and whose work he openly admired.37

Degas, we should observe at this juncture, played a notable and active role in encouraging women who were artists and in bringing them into the Impressionist circle. It was Degas who, after noticing and responding favorably to the work of Cassatt at the Salon of 1874, invited her, three years later, to exhibit with the Impressionists (which she did for the first time in 1879).38 In addition to Cassatt, who was unquestionably the most distinguished of his recruits, Mme. Marie Bracquemond, wife of the engraver Félix, also participated in some of the group exhibitions and received Degas's support and encouragement.39 In later years Degas took considerable interest in the work of Suzanne Valadon. According to his own report, he had one of her drawings hanging in his dining room, and in a series of short notes that he addressed to her throughout the 1890's, he repeatedly praised her talent, admonishing her to address herself to her drawing and to visit him more often with new samples of her work. "Think of nothing but work," he wrote to her, "of utilizing the rare talent that I am proud to see in you..."40 Degas scholars, it is interesting to note, have thus far been able to see little more in this correspondence than a symptom of the artist's approaching senility or the sign of an earlier but otherwise unsubstantiated love affair between the two.41

36 Boggs, Portraits, 31.
38 In response to Cassatt's work at the Salon of 1874, Degas is reported to have said to his friend Tourmy: "C'est vrai. Voilà quelqu'un qui sent comme moi" (Segard, Mary Cassatt, 35).
39 See Degas's letters to Bracquemond and his wife, Degas Letters, 49–51; also, J. Rewald, The History of Impressionism, New York, 1961, 448.
40 Letter of 1901 to Suzanne Valadon, Degas Letters, 218, and undated letter [1897] to Suzanne Valadon, 204. For other letters in this vein, see pp. 189–213; also, the note on sources, p. 270.
41 See Cabanne, 81.
With Berthe Morisot, Degas seems always to have been, at least superficially, on fairly good social terms, although his attitude toward her as an artist is not entirely clear. Although he is reported to have said of her, disparagingly, that "she made pictures the way one would make hats,",$42 he is also reported to have said that behind "her rather airy painting is hidden a most assured drawing."$43 And, significantly, it was Degas who helped Morisot's husband and daughter to organize the posthumous exhibition of her work that was held at Durand-Ruel's in 1896.$44

Although she found his manner perplexing and often exasperating, Morisot clearly admired Degas. She mentioned and quoted him frequently in her letters, commenting on his activities and conversation as well as on his work. In a social sense, however, she far preferred the more conventionally congenial company of her brother-in-law, Manet, with whom her relationship was apparently a courtly one. Manet was reportedly attractive to women, and Morisot, it would seem, appreciated and enjoyed the conventional forms of male social attentiveness.$45 Given their apparently greater acceptance of gender-defined social roles, it is not surprising, then, that Manet and Morisot would have been disturbed and even occasionally offended by Degas's frankness toward women and by his frequent rejection of many of the "appropriate" patterns of social response and behavior. A good example of this is provided by Degas's reported response to Berthe Morisot's expectation that, as a woman, she should and would be courted, an expectation that Degas apparently mocked and was not above playfully thwarting: "He came and sat beside me," Morisot reported to her sister in a letter of 1869, "pretending that he was going to court me, but this courting was confined to a long commentary on Solomon's proverb, 'Woman is the desolation of the righteous.'"$46 Degas's perverse yet extraordinarily self-aware and gently playful effort to undermine Morisot's conventionally feminine social posture in this exchange reveals values and social expectations on his part that were clearly very different from hers—and that were most certainly atypical for his period—but that were not necessarily misogynistic. The obvious difference in point of view that this exchange reveals, moreover, must prompt us to question the objectivity as well as the usefulness of many of Morisot's comments about Degas. It should help, too, to shed some light for us upon Morisot's willingness to accept and to repeat Manet's assessment of the sexual and sentimental nature of their mutual friend, an assessment that, subsequently, has been often quoted without sufficient critical qualification. "He lacks spontaneity," Manet told her of Degas, "he isn't capable of loving a woman, much less of telling her that he does or of doing anything about it."$47

Some indication of the fundamentally different ways in which Manet and Degas regarded women may be derived from a comparison of the portraits they painted of women, who, like themselves, were professionally active as artists. It is particularly instructive in this regard to consider Degas's portrait of Mary Cassatt (Fig. 12) in relation to an earlier portrait by Manet of Berthe Morisot (Fig. 14). The latter, painted in the winter of 1869-70 and exhibited at the Salon of 1873 under the title Le Repos, presents Morisot softly attired in billowing white, reclining languidly upon a sofa. No matter how unconventional and displeasing the style of this picture may have seemed to Manet's contemporaries,$48 as an interpretation of the female sitter, it is revealed by comparison with Degas's work as surprisingly conventional—the image of a dainty and appealing feminine object. That this, fundamentally, was the way in which Manet regarded Berthe Morisot is further suggested by Manet's jocular but nonetheless revealing comment on the Morisot sisters in a letter of 1868 to Fantin-Latour: "I agree with you," he wrote, "the demoiselles Morisot are charming. What a pity they aren't men. Still, as women, they might be able to serve the

$42 Sweet, 33.
$43 In regard to Morisot's exhibition at Boussd and Valadon in 1892, D. Rouart reports that Degas "lui fait le plus grand plaisir qu'il pouvait lui faire en lui disant que sa peinture un peu vapoureuse cache un desir les plus sinceres" (D. Rouart, ed., Correspondance de Berthe Morisot, Paris, 1950, 169). Quoted by Cabanne, 78.
$44 See Degas's letter of 1896 to Julie Manet, Guérin, 196.
$45 See Boggs, Portraits, 24 and 31.
$46 "Il est venu s'asseoir auprès de moi prétendant qu'il allait me faire la cour, mais cette cour s'est bornée à un long commentaire du proverbe de Salomon: 'La femme est la désolation du juste.'" (Rouart, Correspondance de Berthe Morisot, 23). Eng. trans. by W. W. Hubbard, The Correspondence of Berthe Morisot, London, 1957, 27.
$47 In a letter of May 1869, Berthe wrote to her sister Edma: "Quand à ton ami Degas, je ne lui trouve pas décidément une nature attirante; il a de l'esprit, et rien de plus. Manet me disait hier très drôlement: 'Il manque de nature; il n'est pas capable d'aider une femme, même de le lui dire, ni de rien faire'" (Rouart, 31). Eng. trans. in The Correspondence, 35.
$48 On contemporary reactions to the painting, see G. H. Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, New Haven, 1954, 163-66, 169.
cause of painting by each of them marrying an academician and sowing discord in the camp of those old dotards. But that would be to ask of them an excess of self-sacrifice." 

In an undated letter to the Comte Lepic, on the other hand, Degas asked his friend—who was a breeder of fine dogs as well as a painter and engraver—to find a dog for Miss Cassatt. In a postscript to the letter, he described Cassatt as “this distinguished person whose friendship I honor as you would in my place,” adding: “I also believe it unnecessary to give you any other information about the applicant, whom you know to be a good painter, at the moment given to studies of reflection and shadows on flesh or dresses, for which she has the greatest feeling and understanding.”

In portraiture, then, Degas did not paint women as stereotyped feminine objects but as distinct human beings, emphasizing neither charm nor grace nor prettiness, but rather, individual character. This fact often put off his contemporaries, and helps us to explain the less than enthusiastic response that his portraits sometimes elicited—even from sitters and observers who should have known better. Thus, Berthe Morisot’s ambivalent comment on Degas’s austere and exquisitely refined portrait of Mme. Gaujelin (L. 165), which she saw at the Salon of 1869 and with which, according to her own somewhat bemused report, Degas himself “seemed
very pleased." She pronounced it to be "a very pretty little portrait of a very ugly woman in black..." But Berthe's sister, Yves, reacting to the portrait that Degas had done of her, commented ambiguously that it was "franc et fin tout à la fois." Manet, of course, was so greatly displeased with the portrait of his wife in Degas's double portrait of the pair—painted around 1865 and showing Manet on a sofa listening to his wife at the piano (Fig. 15; L. 127)—that he cut the canvas in two, provoking considerable ill-feeling between himself and his friend. Even Mary Cassatt, later in life, developed a strong dislike for the tender and sympathetic—but, nonetheless, unconventional—portrait that Degas had painted of her some three decades earlier. Late in the year 1912, she wrote to her dealer, Durand-Ruel: "I don't want to leave this portrait by Degas to my family as one of me. It has some qualities as a work of art but it is so painful and represents me as such a repugnant person that I would not want anyone to know that I posed for it." To understand what it was that Cassatt found objectionable in this portrait, one must compare it to a portrait, contemporary with Degas's, that Cassatt painted of herself (Fig. 16). As Boggis observes, Degas's portrait seems to us "to have a stronger and happier character than the charming portrait [that Cassatt] painted of herself." And in those two words, "stronger" as opposed to "charming," lies the essential difference. Both portraits are designed to appear informal. But the informality of the self-portrait—communicated by the posture, the gaze, the appealing inclination of the head—is still conventionally "feminine" in its range of allusion and in its broader message.

Degas's refusal to flatter his female sitters is, of course, no proof of misogyny, even though some of his contemporaries, and ours as well, would have been inclined to interpret it as such. As the portrait of Manet, from the remains of the mutilated double portrait (Fig. 15), itself serves to demonstrate, Degas, throughout his career, was as physically realistic in painting men as he was in painting women—just as few people of his acquaintance, no matter what their gender, were spared entirely from the effects of his biting wit and irascible temper, especially as he grew older. A good case in point is the Italian critic, Diego Martelli, whom Degas painted in 1879 in all of his rotundity (Fig. 17; L. 519), and who wrote in a letter at about this time that he feared, as he put it, that he "ran the risk" of becoming Degas's friend! Degas's portrait of Martelli, like his portrait of Cassatt, is informal but not without dignity. It is an image that is in some ways physically unflattering, but that reveals, nevertheless, the character, the intelligence, and the individuality of the sitter.

Although Degas avoided stereotypes when he painted portraits of particular women, who were usually members of his own social circle and class, he was far more inclined to reduce his subjects to types when he dealt with women of the lower working class. Yet even here, the formal prototypes upon which he drew and the iconographical associations that he chose to summon up can often suggest an intention far different from the purely negative one often inferred, both by his contemporaries and ours. Thus, behind the crouching bather (Fig. 18; L. 872), whom Degas, according to Huysmans, had shown "debased in her tub, in the humiliating posture of intimate care," there lies the formal prototype of the Hellenistic Crouching Venus (Fig. 19), a Roman copy of which is in the Louvre. And behind Degas's many studies, both sculptured and painted, of dancers adjusting their shoes (e.g., Fig. 20)—those hard-working, determined, street-urchin ballerinas whose social origins Degas never lets us forget—there lies a tradition that can be traced back to a relief from the Temple of Athena Niké, the goddess of Victory (Fig. 21). Nor can we ignore the implications of the fact that Degas's interest in the formal movement of Michelangelo's "Slave," studied from the posed model as well as from the statue itself in the Louvre (Fig. 22), eventually bore fruit in the figure of the exhausted laundress, who stretches as she pauses in her work—the contemporary female slave, whom the social system exploits (Fig. 23; L. 785). Although the formal patterns presented by these traditional figure types may have appealed to Degas visually, there is something in the content of these figural prototypes as well that endows the artist's choice with additional significance, enriching his formal allusion and in part justifying it.

No examination of Degas's "misogyny" would be complete without consideration of his "failure to marry," a fact of the artist's personal life to which a disproportionate amount of significance has been attached. In addition to "misogyny," the theories that have been adduced to explain his single state have run the gamut from "natural timidity" to the equally unsupported speculation that he may have been "a repressed homosexual." We know, certainly, that Degas's solitary existence, especially as he approached middle age, was not without its moments of loneliness and regret. Upon occasion, the example of the happy family life enjoyed by many of his relatives and friends prompted him to express his own longings for the joys of home and family and to speculate upon the possibilities of a similar sort of existence for himself. Yet despite this conscious and occasionally bitter sense of deprivation, he seems to have been ruled, nevertheless, as one writer has put it, by "some deeper urge towards non-in-


21 Nike Fixing Her Sandal, marble relief from the Temple of Athena Nike, 421-415 B.C. Athens, Acropolis Museum (photo: Alinari)


22 Degas, drawings, left: from model; right: after Michelangelo's Slave.

volvement," a position that the artist's contemporary, Georges Rivière, perceptively—and matter-of-factly—summed up in the following way:

He was unhappy about living alone, but at the same time, he realized that, given the conditions under which he lived, he was simply not cut out for the annoyances of family life. He envied, he said, the lot of some of his friends, surrounded by a happy family, but his imagination would raise a hundred objections against any inclination toward marriage, if ever his thoughts were to stray beyond a vague sadness over being deprived of joys that were not made for him. 

By interpreting Degas's bachelorhood as a sure sign of serious maladjustment, we have been responding, clearly, to a cultural bias: we have been confusing what may simply have been a distaste for certain role-defined patterns of behavior and the kind of life they impose with distaste in general for all of the members of the opposite sex. For even though Degas may ultimately have rejected conventional domesticity as either unsuitable or impracticable for himself, he was not necessarily a man who feared or disliked women. To establish this, one need but glance without prejudice through the artist's correspondence, that record of his social relationships, wherein is revealed not only his ability to relate to women, but also the important role that they played for him—actresses, dancers, painters, musicians, friends, and the wives of friends—both socially and intellectually, throughout his life. His sympathetic response to them and his remarkably clear-sighted perception of their social condition in nearly every walk of life are qualities that pervade his career and leave a distinctive stamp upon almost every aspect of his art.

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61 Nicolson, 240.

62 "Il s'irritait de vivre seul et, en même temps, il se rendait compte qu'il n'était point fait pour les tracas de la vie familiale, en raison des conditions dans lesquelles il vivait. Il envoyait, disait-il, le sort de quelques-uns de ses amis, entourés d'une heureuse famille, mais son imagination devait soulever cent objections contre toute velléité de mariage, si jamais la pensée de l'artiste allait plus loin qu'une vague tristesse d'être privé de joies qui n'étaient pas faites pour lui" (Rivière, 18).