



PICASSO LOOKS AT DEGAS

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Throughout his long and prolific career, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) observed, absorbed, and competed with the work of other artists, from his student days in Spain to his first encounters with the art world of Paris and into his last years. One of the artists Picasso particularly admired was Edgar Degas (1834–1917). His response varied over time from emulation to confrontation, and parody to homage. By juxtaposing paintings, sculpture, and works on paper that have never before been exhibited together, *Picasso Looks at Degas* explores the younger artist's lifelong fascination with the work and personality of Degas.

THE EARLY YEARS

In his youth, when he lived in Spain, Picasso would not have had an opportunity to see Degas's work firsthand, yet the two artists' shared background accounts for numerous parallels in their imagery. Both received traditional academic training, which involved making careful drawings of models, while outside the classroom they also produced more fully realized studies of family members, friends, and other figures. As his education progressed, however, Picasso began to rebel against academic teaching just as Degas had done.

In 1900 Picasso made his first trip to Paris, and after several years of dividing his time between Spain and France, he moved definitively to the French capital in 1904. Although he and Degas lived in the same Montmartre neighborhood for a number of years and had many acquaintances in common, there is no evidence that they ever met. Yet thanks to increasing exposure to Degas's art, some of Picasso's first images of Paris clearly took up the subjects—café-goers, cabaret entertainers, and bathers—that had become associated with the older artist's work.

THE BALLET

Another subject closely associated with Degas was the dance, and Picasso frequently turned to his predecessor's work on the theme. In 1907, as he was developing his major proto-Cubist work, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Olympia) (Museum of Modern Art, New York), Picasso seems to have drawn inspiration from Degas's most famous—and notorious—sculpture, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. The full extent of Degas's dance pictures came to light at the sales of the contents of his studio following his death in 1917, in the same period that Picasso met and married the ballerina



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Standing Nude*, 1907, by Pablo Picasso. Oil on canvas, 93 x 43 cm. Museo del Novecento, Milan (8750). © 2010 Estate of Pablo Picasso / ARS, New York; *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1879–81, by Edgar Degas. Bronze, with gauze tutu and silk ribbon, on wooden base, 99 cm. The Clark. ABOVE: *Combining the Hair (La Coiffure)*, c. 1896, by Edgar Degas. Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 146.7 cm. The National Gallery, London. Bought, 1937 (NG 4865). © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY LEFT: *Woman Plaiting Her Hair*, 1906, by Pablo Picasso. Oil on canvas, 127 x 90.8 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Florene May Schoenborn Bequest, 1996 (826.1996). © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource. © 2010 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Olga Khokhlova. For roughly the next decade, Picasso's depictions of Olga and her milieu often relied on the vocabulary established by Degas as the painter of dancers.

THE PRIVATE WORLD OF WOMEN

The subject of women bathing and tending to their hair especially fascinated Degas, who showed models in real-life settings performing everyday actions. In 1906, when bathing scenes briefly dominated Picasso's iconography, his willfully "primitive" form of classicism was inspired in part by Degas's daringly simplified late style. The subject re-emerged in Picasso's work after Degas's death, and in the following years, he periodically produced major paintings and suites of drawings depicting women washing themselves and arranging their hair, acknowledging Degas's precedent by adopting his most characteristic poses and compositions.

Between 1958 and 1960 Picasso realized a longstanding ambition by acquiring nine provocative works by Degas for his own collection, part of a series of monotypes usually dated to the period 1876–77, in which Degas had explicitly depicted scenes in a brothel, showing prostitutes as they interacted with or simply waited for clients, socialized, or washed themselves. These monotypes had a particular appeal for Picasso. In March 1971 Picasso launched into a series of etchings directly inspired by the brothel monotypes. Degas himself appears as a character in thirty-nine of these scenes, no longer the unseen observer but a literal, if reluctant, participant. These works thus confirm that the older artist remained both an inspiration and a challenge for Picasso throughout his life.

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