

Degas, Dance, Dallas

Richard Kendall

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Dallas Museum of Art
Horchow Auditorium

Heather MacDonald: I am so pleased to welcome you here this evening for this lecture by Richard Kendall. It's the first event in our 2009-2010 season of our Richard R. Brettell Lecture Series. The Brettell Lecture Series was founded in 1993 to provide a regular public venue with the DMA for the presentation of the most important and innovative new scholarship on the history of 19th and 20th century European art.

This series was created with a generous endowment from museum trustees, Carolyn and Roger Horchow in honor of Dr. Richard Brettell, former Director of the Dallas Museum of Art, the current Margaret McDermott Distinguished Chair of Art and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, and himself a well-respected specialist in the art of this period. We are very pleased to have Dr. Brettell with us this evening.

Over the history of the Brettell Lecture Series we have been fortunate to share with the museum's public some of the most creative art historians working today, including Stephen Eisenman, Joachim Pissarro, and most recently Lynn Gamwell.

This season will serve as yet another chapter in this proud history, as we present five major lectures, all focusing on French art of the late 19th century in our collections.

If you do not already have this brochure with the details of the lectures for this season, please pick one up on your way out. It's a two-sided brochure.

We have chosen to dedicate this season of the Brettell Lectures to the late Carolyn Horchow, who passed away earlier this year. Mrs. Horchow was not only a patron of this museum and of the arts, but also a dedicated supporter of art historical scholarship. Even at the end of her life, Mrs. Horchow eagerly discussed our plans for this series with Dr. Brettell. We are proud to present these lectures in her memory.

Our speaker tonight, Richard Kendall, is internationally known as a curator of exhibitions of 19th and 20th century European art. After graduate study at the Courtauld Institute in London, Kendall went on to teach at Manchester Metropolitan University, before turning to a career as an independent writer and curator.

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His exhibitions have been presented at major museums, both in the U.S. and abroad, including the Clark Art Institute, where he is a Consulting Curator, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tate Gallery, and the National Gallery, London.

He is one of the leading specialists working today on the art of Edgar Degas, and over the past two decades has organized the exhibitions, *Degas: Images of Women* in 1989, *Degas Landscapes* in 1993, *Degas and the Little Dancer* in 1998, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism* in 1996, and with his wife, Jill DeVonyar, *Degas and the Dance* in 2002-2003.

He is of course currently completing work on an exhibition of Picasso's interest in Degas that will open at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts next year, before traveling to the Picasso Museum in Barcelona.

Mr. Kendall's lecture this evening will be focused on a group of Degas' ravishing images of ballet dancers, on stage and off, that are currently on view in our exhibition, *All the World's a Stage: Celebrating Performance in the Visual Arts*.

After the lecture we invite you to visit the exhibition, if you have not already had a chance to do so, and to seek out the performance space inside the exhibition galleries for a special performance that starts at 8 o'clock, by Contemporary Ballet Dallas, that has been inspired by the work of Degas.

In closing, I would just like to take a quick moment to thank our promotional partner for the Brettell Lecture Series, the radio station WRR and our hotel partner, the Adolphus.

Now, without further ado, please join me in welcoming to the podium Richard Kendall.

Richard Kendall: I have to pour myself some water.

[00:03:51.2]

Well, good evening ladies and gentlemen. It's a great pleasure to be in Dallas again, and to be at your truly wonderful museum, and to be involved in the Richard Brettell Lecture Series. I can speak from personal experience about Rick, and I know that as an art historian he is highly respected throughout the world. He has produced indispensable work on several artists, Camille Pissarro, Paul Gauguin, etcetera.

He has written extraordinary texts on Impressionism in general, and I should add, grudgingly, a rather good catalog on Degas for the Art Institute of Chicago, which I still use regularly.

As a colleague, Rick is always generous with his scholarship. He is notably open to discussion, and curious about the work of others; this isn't necessarily true of people in art history.

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On a personal level, Rick has become a very good friend. He and his wife Carol have often wined and dined me, offered me shelter wherever they happened to be living at that moment, Dallas or Williamstown or wherever.

And possibly some of you, one or two of you in this audience, will have an unhappy memory of me coming to lecture at Dallas before, when Rick and Carol were crucial in my survival. I was struck down by a terrible throat infection, and I gave what was certainly the worst lecture in my life, for which I hope you forgive me. But Rick and Carol typically and generously took me in, put me to bed, fed me chicken soup, and generally helped to nurse me back into a state where I could just about croak out a few words. So thank you for inviting me back after that disaster.

[00:05:57.0]

Tonight I am going to speak about three pictures by Edgar Degas in the DMA. And all three of them are based on his most well-known theme, subject, the ballet. I chose the title "Degas, Dance, Dallas" because as an Englishman I like terrible puns. This happens to be a pun on arguably the best book ever written about Edgar Degas, and I recommend it to any of you who don't know it. Paul Valéry's book *Degas Danse Dessin*. This was first published in 1934, and it's available in English as *Degas Dance Drawing*, hence my rather feeble title, "Degas, Dance, Dallas."

Valéry was one of the most brilliant figures in French culture in the early 20th Century. He was interested as a young man in mathematics. He wrote poetry. He wrote novels. He developed an interest in Classicism. He was a man of many, many parts.

The man who wrote the introduction to the English edition of *Degas Danse Dessin*, Douglas Cooper, said of Valéry, this is important, that he was first and foremost an intellectual, and a man of letters. This is very significant because Valéry was not an art historian and yet he wrote this extraordinary book.

And it's possible, and this is relevant to what I am going to be saying, that the great originality and the great freshness of Valéry's observations about Degas were because he wasn't an expert on art, he was an intellectual who approached Degas as, if you like, a fellow intellectual.

[00:07:56.0]

In the 1890s when Paul Valéry was a teenager, he got to know Degas through mutual friends. Degas was by then in his 60s, late 60s. Valéry visited Degas in his studio many times. Degas obviously liked him. He could be grumpy and inhospitable if he chose, and they talked and they talked and they talked.

In his book, Valéry describes some of these visits and some of these rather extraordinary conversations. But his main aim in the book was to communicate something about Degas' mind, to try and communicate a sense of his creative thinking, as much as what went on when he was making a drawing.

I will give you -- he said some remarkable things about Degas, some of the best single phrases ever written about the artist. I will give you a couple of examples. Valéry said about Degas that he was "the most intelligent, the most reflective, the most merciless draftsman in the world". I will repeat that, "the most intelligent, the most reflective, the most merciless draftsman in the world".

He said on another occasion, "art for him [i.e. Degas] was simply a series of problems in a more subtle kind of mathematics than the real one". Now, that is a really startling statement. For Degas, art was a series of problems that he might set about solving, as a mathematician would in the field of pure maths.

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And what I personally would do is to summarize Valéry's view of Degas in a very striking and memorable way. He is suggesting that Degas is a very complex human being, and a very complex maker of art. Yes, he was gifted technically, wonderful drawer, he was very innovative in several ways, but he was also, and this I think is critical, he was a thinker. He was a problem solver, even a problem maker in a kind of, shall we call it, a mathematics of art. And this is going to be my central theme this evening as I look at these pastels.

To deal with Degas, who is, let's face it, is an extraordinary popular artist throughout the world. That embarrassing list of exhibitions that Heather read out, these are exhibitions that people love to go and see because they love Degas' art.

But it's also true that Degas is quite often regarded as rather lightweight as an artist. His works are regarded as pretty or gorgeous, and there is an implicit downgrading of Degas as an artist against say some of his tougher contemporaries like Cézanne, for example, or Pissarro or Gauguin.

So what I am going to try and do in the next 50 minutes or so is to argue along with Valéry that Degas was indeed a tough, hard thinking artist. And I believe that truly Degas deserves to be seen as one of the most original and challenging, sometimes frankly tough and difficult, of the great artists in the beginning of the modern period. My aim is to convince you all of that before you leave this lecture theater.

[00:11:59.0]

On the screen we have one of the great pictures in the DMA by Degas, called *Aria after the Ballet* [1985.R.26]. And I am going to spend some time with this picture, because it needs quite a lot of unraveling. And my methodology is going to be to look at it through Valéry's eyes and through Valéry's thinking.

For example, to us, well what exactly did Valéry mean by those statements I read out? In this extraordinary picture which I was able to study on the wall in the exhibition this afternoon, and I hope you will all go and look at it again, in what way is this the result of solving a series of problems? What does that mean? And when we look at this picture, how do we know that it was made by "the most intelligent, the most reflective artist of his generation"?

Well, let's begin with a few facts. *Aria after the Ballet* was exhibited by Degas in the fourth Impressionist Exhibition which took place in 1879, in Paris. That historic series of shows in which the Impressionist movement was born. Degas himself incidentally used the title *Grand Air, After the Ballet*, the current -- today's title is a slight modification.

And in several respects *Aria after the Ballet* can be described as characteristic of Degas' ballet art, the kind of art that established his reputation in the 19th century and still makes him so well loved today.

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It's predominantly made in pastel, a medium that Degas more than any modern artist has made famous. Pastel produces extraordinarily subtle, rich colors. The slide of course doesn't do it justice, they never do, but if we just think about this very delicate range of greens on the hillside, this curiously silver gold sky, the pinks in here in the tutus, and the sort of egg yolk yellow in the figure in the foreground. And inevitably, the original is infinitely more beautiful and more subtle in this respect.

Pastel is also unsurpassed as a medium for communicating texture. Again, if you look at the sky, you will realize that it's very flat. It's washed on with some--as is the mountain here--with a sort of thin water-based paint like gouache, and possibly *essence*.

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This is very lightly textured, where the trees and some areas here, look at the women's gown. This is dense with pigment, dense with particles of chalk, and it's very, very tactile, it makes you want to touch it.

Pastel, one of the reasons Degas loved it, I think, was it's a marvelous medium for representing light with. And here we have the soft light of nature. It's probably a painted backdrop, but that's what it's meant to be, and we have the strong harsh lighting of modern electricity or lamps, and we get both beautifully rendered with this very, very subtle medium. And combined with Degas merciless draftsman you can use pastel as a drawing medium, as well as a sort of painting medium.

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Degas has created this sense of extraordinary intensity here, intense activity, intense movement, a sense of rhythm running all the way through here, and this dramatic gesture here.

So what I would say initially in my summary of this picture is that Degas has used all the media at his command and all his skill to create a great amount of information. He is telling you a lot about what is happening on this stage. He is telling you about the fabrics and the scenery and what it feels like to be there, and what it's like to touch these surfaces. It's dense with visual information, tactile information, documentary information, and so forth. We are getting a great sort of barrage of information coming at us.

Now, here I am adding on the right an image familiar to all of you who have been to Paris. This is the Paris Opera House. It was opened in 1875, designed by Charles Garnier, and was very soon being claimed as the greatest opera house in the world, and it has had an extraordinary reputation ever since. The building still exists; you can go and watch ballets there today.

Personally, I think it's one of the ugliest buildings every built but that's a matter of taste. I am happy to say that in the course of working on Degas I have been able to go there a lot and indeed to go backstage, to go on the stage, to examine the spaces that Degas himself knew. And crucial here is that we know that Degas knew this building very well. He went there a great deal. And almost all of his ballet pictures are based on productions that took place in this building, some of which are still revived from time to time. So this is the site, if you like, of Degas' subject matter.

[00:18:02.9]

Degas had a great love for music. He was very knowledgeable about music, and over the years he got to know, not only the opera, but the opera staff. Several of his best friends played in the orchestra. He knew the conductor, the chief conductor. He got to know the opera director. And in time he got permission to go backstage and visit the dancers. And he knew many of the dancers personally; indeed he had an affair with one of the dancers--we know at least one--and he paid them to come to his studio to pose for him. So his relationship with this building is very intimate.

Something else you should know, if you are not already aware of this, is that in this period, operas were typically accompanied by ballets. Sometimes as a separate addition to the program, sometimes as interludes or *divertissements* during the ballets. Some of the practice, that is I think, thankfully died on the whole, but that was the -- several of

Degas pictures of the Paris opera represent the ballets that are embedded in an opera.

And in a case like the DMA pastel, there is so much information here for us to draw on that it's often possible to identify the production and even some of the performers, simply from the visual evidence of Degas' art.

And while working on the previous exhibition, the 2002 exhibition, we were able to link *Aria after the Ballet* for the first time with a rather famous opera that was played in Degas lifetime.

[00:19:48.8]

While working in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, the library of the opera, which is situated in Charles Garnier's building, we came across this engraving on the right, which has never been used before in the context of this pastel. It's dated 1869 and it represents a scene from a production of the opera of Charles Gounod's *Faust*. As you can see, it's a very wide of the opera stage, where Degas' is a much tighter view.

But the two images, you have probably already noticed, have some very interesting features in common. The distinctive range of mountains up here. Oh dear, we have lost some of the mountains there. I am sorry about that. But you have to take my word for it that there are some peaks just there that look like those peaks. We even have the streaks of cloud going across like that, just there. These very distinctive pine trees here, of course there as well in the engraving. Slightly different on the left, but here is the descending hillside as here. And equally distinctively this deep, dark, gully valley here, where the action takes place, is behind what we are seeing here.

There is no doubt in my mind now that *Aria after the Ballet* is based on an episode from Goethe's *Faust* and represents a scene from a production that Degas saw.

I should say that *Faust* was among the greatest hits in French opera in the late 19th century. It was performed again and again. In Degas' lifetime there were 500 performances of this opera. So let's say he had plenty of chances to see it.

And we know indeed from his letters and from the records at the opera that he did indeed see it. Sometimes he sort of went every year, just to sort of remind himself of the opera. So he knew this very well.

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Now, in Act 5 of *Faust*, the action is set in the Harz Mountains in Germany. Hence the rocky mountains, hence of course the pine trees, and the sense that we are in a Northern European landscape here and certainly not a Mediterranean landscape.

In Goethe's story the hero, I am afraid you can barely make him out, the two little figures here, we see Faust himself, who is taken up into the mountains by Mephistopheles, the devil, and shown various visions--visions of history, visions of the classical world, and so on.

And knowing that, it helps us to explain what -- nobody has ever really questioned the presence of this extraordinary figure here in this landscape. This is Northern Europe but she looks to me very much like an ancient Greek. You agree? She doesn't look like a German maiden. And indeed in Goethe's *Faust* there is a vision of Helen of Troy and some great beauties of the past, which would explain her.

And I should add that in some of the older DMA literature, this pastel is cheerfully associated with the ballet *L'Africaine*, and you don't have to be very good at French to work that out, as a ballet about Africa. And indeed, if you look at the libretto for *L'Africaine*, you see that it is set in a jungle, and some of it is set on a galleon at sea, and this doesn't look very much like Africa to me. And I think we can accept that the African connection can be dropped.

[00:23:52.4]

So at this point, having told you about some of the facts of this picture, I should return to Paul Valéry, and some of the issues I raised earlier. I think we could probably all agree that this pastel is the product of an intelligent mind. This is very subtly created. It's a complex response to something that Degas had actually seen on the stage. It's certainly reflective to use Valéry's terms. It has certainly been thought through and presented in a very novel way.

And some of the draftsmanship, the drawing of these figures and the figures behind, is extremely ingenious and original, and I suppose we could even call it merciless, to use Valéry's exact words. So up to a point it seems to fit Valéry's definition of what Degas is up to.

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But at this point I have to remark on something I haven't said so far. I have controlled myself and kept it to myself and that is to say that *Aria after the Ballet* is truly one of the strangest pictures that Degas ever made. It's a very weird composition indeed; and this is where we I think we go deeper, when we explore Degas' mind and when we explore what Valéry said about him.

Even when you know the connection with *Faust* and even when you know something about Degas, it only takes you so far. Yes, it's nice to know that this corresponds to that, and we can make sense of her, but what exactly is happening on this stage, what is happening here, what is happening back here?

[00:25:54.3]

The truth is it's a kind of conundrum or mystery. It is far from being legible or coherent in the way that Degas' ballet pictures often are. And I think we are entitled to say, well, why does it look like this, what is Degas doing? What is going on his mind? Why did he decide to cut the singer's legs off? This is the whole picture you are seeing, what is going on there? Why did he decide to pick out this little rectangle rather than what the engraver did, and that is to show the whole scene?

Well, one way of approaching that question is -- now, I should point out that this lithograph has been inadvertently flipped. It's rather convenient for us, because it means that the two men are looking at the stage, but they should be facing the other direction. It doesn't matter.

One way of tackling *Aria after the Ballet*, and often a useful way of looking at Degas' art of this period, is to think about it as a picture about human vision. Human vision is a subject that fascinated Degas, obsessed him in certain periods, and a lot of his pictures rotate around his interest in human vision.

In this lithograph, which is by Honoré Daumier, a predecessor of Degas who he greatly admired, we can articulate some of the issues that are at work.

It was actually made in 1852, many years earlier, but it shows the old Opera House, the one that preceded Charles Garnier. So the scene is essentially timeless. What we are seeing here is a section of the audience seated in the stalls, as we call them in England, do you call them that here? I am not sure, the seats closest to the stage on the ground floor of any theater.

[00:28:00.4]

What you get when you are sitting in the stalls, the people in the front rows of this theater having that experience, is you get a horizontal view of the action. The men are looking straight in front of them. They are looking straight in front. Everybody around them is looking straight in front of them, because they are leveled with the stage. That's a distinctive feature of what they are doing.

The next thing to notice is that one of the prominent men is looking with his naked eyes, as you are, most of you are tonight, all of you are tonight, and one has chosen to use opera glasses.

Now, if you look back to the picture, you realize that nobody, even sitting in the front of the stalls, nobody's field of view would be filled with that. The human eye just doesn't work like that. We get a much broader field of view. However, if we were using opera glasses, we might well crop the scene and get this view.

And what Degas has done you realize, is not to give the view of the average opera attendee, but he is giving this man's view, the view through lenses, through an artificial contrivance. And the thing that's most familiar to us today is the zoom on a camera. If you have all seen electronic camera, you can press the zoom function and you can zoom in on your target.

Zoom lenses didn't exist at this time, they simply hadn't been invented, but Degas and the guy with the opera glasses were in effect jumping ahead and imagining that.

It's also worth reflecting that the view that this gentleman is having is a privileged one. The stalls are always the most expensive seats at any theater. You have to be very wealthy to sit there in 19th Century France. And this closeup view, where you can see just two or three performers horizontally, was a view that most visitors to the theater would never have had.

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So the zoom view, the closeup view, was a new visual experience for the vast majority of people looking at Degas' art. It was very novel, it was just

as dramatic as certain effects you can get these days with a zoom lens on a camera.

So what in effect this did, even today it looks to us like a puzzle picture, I think there can be no doubt that when it was shown in 1879, this picture would have been a shocking picture. It would have been a very unfamiliar picture simply because most people had never experienced this kind of intimacy, this kind of in-your-face encounter with a stage performance. It would have been quite remarkable, almost a disruptive encounter.

In that sense, as with many other aspects of Degas' art, it was profoundly modern in a way that we have lost today, because we simply are more familiar with alternative ways of looking.

Now, I have talked about one strategy that Degas used, one or two strategies that Degas used in setting up the *Aria after the Ballet*. Another strategy that he used to engage his viewers and to startle them was to deliberately disrupt certain of their expectations.

[00:31:47.8]

Look for a moment at this detail on the right hand screen. Imagine I wasn't showing you what was on the left hand screen. I don't think you would have the slightest idea what was going on. It really is the most extraordinary passage. It occupies about a quarter of the picture. It's the most extraordinary passage in the work of art from the 19th Century. And it comes very, very close to complete visual incoherence.

Now, that's a pretty remarkable thing to say about a 19th century artist's work, and there can be no doubt at all that Degas meant this very deliberately, because he played with this device. This is the head of a double bass, as I am sure you have worked out, that goes down into the orchestra just in front of the stage, and behind it you can just about make out various fragments of arms, and with the help of this head you can begin to sense that these are a bunch of ballet dancers behind there. But you really have to work at it to make sense of it.

What Degas is doing is replacing information and clarity with veiled confusion, the illegible instead of the legible. In those terms this was both a very brave thing to do for a young artist and an extremely radical thing to do in terms of the history of art.

So what we are talking about here is the conveyance of information in a clear form, which enables us to identify what the setting is. Here we are

talking about the exact opposite, where Degas literally blots our view by interposing the double basses, and it's particularly poignant in this picture because the thing that he obscures is the ballet dancers. She is a singer, but this is where the dancers are.

[00:33:53.6]

The gentleman that I showed you in the Daumier cartoon a moment ago famously came to the opera just to look at the girls. It was the sight of a woman with bare arms in the 19th century, don't forget, it was an erotic experience, and famously the stalls were full of dirty old men who came there to enjoy the sight of the half-naked bodies. And Degas very cheekily has decided to deny them their pleasure, to disrupt their expectations, and turn the whole experience of going to the opera upside down.

In effect, Degas seems to be really obstreperous. He is saying that the ballet doesn't matter. The story that's being told doesn't matter. What really matters is your experience of this picture. And I am tinkering, I am toying with your experience to challenge your ways of thinking, to challenge your ways of looking.

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So just to summarize, I think I am showing you here truly one of Degas' most obtuse pictures. He doesn't often go this far, and it's wonderful that you have it here in the museum and you can play with it. It teases us. It challenges us. It irritates us I am sure in some respect. But the key thing, he is making our brains work. Degas, the intellectual Degas, the problem maker, is making us think, he is throwing the ball back at us and saying, you need to sort this out, you need to rethink this for yourself.

And in that sense, this takes us closer to Valéry's definition, I think. The man who is fascinated by problems, and here Degas has played with the problem of how people look at pictures. How people look at things on the stage. How can I tinker with that to make it more thrilling, more challenging for people who are looking at my pictures?

[00:36:00.3]

Well, we now move on to the second picture that I am going to talk about, frankly, another masterpiece of Degas' middle years, *Ballet Dancers on the Stage* [1986.277], made about five years later than the previous one, four or five years later, around the early 1880s. Again,

made in pastel and again, of course a representation of ballet dancers on the opera stage.

By this date Degas had got a considerable reputation. He was already being talked about as the painter of dancers; oh, the man who paints ballet dancers. And in some ways it gave him the courage and the confidence to go even further. He continued in the 80s to produce some really challenging, really strange pictures as he was exploring these problems that interested him. And in some cases, as in this picture I think, the problems actually get tougher. If you like, the pictorial mathematics that Degas is playing with become all the more mind bending.

Well, here we just have dancers. We don't have any scenery at all, but clearly they are on the stage and some sort of performance seems to be underway. It's probably one of these *divertissements* I told you about earlier.

And for many years I thought that this was a sort of moment of casualness perhaps, that the dancers were coming up to take a bow at the end of the act or something. But my wife who was formerly a very serious ballet dancer has told me I am wrong, and this is in fact a choreographed moment. That if you look at these two feet, for example, you realize they belong to different dancers who are doing exactly the same thing.

[00:38:00.2]

If you look at their hands, you will see several of them are making -- where is the other one? Several of them are making this movement with their hands, which is a particular ballet gesture that was much favored in the 19th century, which is part of a dance position, a dance procedure. So this is a very complicated piece of choreography unfolding in front of our eyes.

And in many other respects, as with *Aria after the Ballet*, Degas feeds us this kind of information. It's another picture that is very rich in information. Look at all the details we get of costumes, this particular kind of costume, different costume here. So he tells us about the accoutrements of the dancers, this black choker around this girl's neck. There's even bits of jewelry that -- you see there, a bracelet, a specific bracelet is indicated, and there again, and there again.

And if you look at the faces, they are very, very distinct. This young lady has a totally different face and different stature, to this young girl, rather sort of mindlessly grinning girl at the back. And I think there is no real doubt that what we are seeing here is portraits of real dancers. I told you he knew these people. We haven't been able to work out who this is, but she must have been one of the dancers in the corps de ballet at the Paris Opera.

So we are getting all that information about the ballet, about the opera, about this production, and yet, even more in the previous picture, Degas denies us a huge amount of information. So much so that he almost reduces the thing to incomprehensibility.

[00:39:58.5]

For example, there is no scenery, so we don't have the scenery to work out what the production was. We simply don't know what this ballet was and the details of the costumes are not so far sufficient to identify what the production might be. I simply can't tell you. We therefore don't know what the music was that was playing. We don't know therefore who the stars were, who were dancing. All of that is taken away from us. This is no longer documentary in the way that the previous picture was.

And we find that we are left with no information at all about the event. We simply don't know when it was, we don't know about what people were seeing. Degas has chosen to pull all of that sort of stuff out of the picture and leave us with just this scene. So if the other picture was a tease this is a sort of double or triple tease.

And to make the point even oh, yes this -- I meant to show you this one I was talking about the individuals. Here you can see rather more clearly the items of jewelry and so forth that I was telling you about. This very specific costume you feel must be based on a real costume; it's not something he has made up. And these rather distinctive gestures of the hands that he studied so carefully so he gets them absolutely right. This really by the way is fiendish draftsmanship; this is the kind of mercilessly correct draftsmanship that Valery so much admired.

I put in here a much more conventional image of a ballet production on stage just to show you how far Degas had come. This is admittedly slightly earlier to ballet called *Semiramis*, this took part, took place within the opera *Semiramis* that Degas did a picture painting of.

[00:42:00.7]

But here we get all the information you could possibly wish for. We get the trees, the background, the set, we get the whole corps de ballet with the stars and the lesser figures, and with this any fool could establish what they wanted to know about this production.

Degas has struck out all of these things and of course again he has decided not to use the conventional visual relationship, which here this is the view from the stalls. This is looking straight at the stage of the opera; this is looking as the wealthy people would do in the stalls. And Degas, for reasons best known to himself, has decided to be as contrary as it is possible to be in a theater. Not only is he not looking at them from a distance, so you get a nice view of the stage, he has moved in really close and he has decided not to look at them horizontally but from another angle.

Now, the question is what is that angle? Where is Degas sitting when he is imagining where he is seeing the scene, where you the viewer implicitly placed?

It's not a particularly easy question to answer. Here I am offering you a seating plan of the Paris opera so you can choose your seats for your next trip to Paris. This is a 19th Century seating plan and you can see there, here are the stalls, this is where the orchestra was right down here. These are the seats in the orchestras they called it. Degas seat was about here, I have actually sat in it. These are the different tiers right up to what we call the gods in England, the cheap seats right at the top where the students can go for almost nothing.

[00:43:53.5]

So you could be high above the stage, but even if you were way up here, you still get a sort of 45 degree angle of the stage. You are not on top as you obviously are here. We know we are on top because look, we are looking down on tops of the heads, on the tops of the arms and we actually see a great expanse of stage. So we clearly must be high above them.

Notice these seats close to the stage. This is right at the front of the stage. These are for very privileged and very wealthy visitors. They are still there in the Paris Opera, the equivalent. And if you were sitting here or there, you would indeed be high above the stage and looking down, but still at a somewhat oblique angle. It's possible that Degas was one in one of these seats and I can show you a group of opera visitors again in a

19th century engraving who are in a box and you see that this lady is using a pair of opera glasses. You can even see the angle she is not looking down like that. She is looking across of the stage.

(00:45:03)

So she wouldn't get this view and even this gentleman who is standing is looking over here, not down there. So we perhaps need to look somewhere else.

And one of the things I discovered when working on the 2003 show was something I've never really understood about theatres at this time, which still comes as surprise to most people, that this is a painting by Degas, earlier painting the old opera house, but the logic is still the same in the new building, that in the 19th century, not only were there seats right at the front of the stage, there were seats on the stage, you see this?

[00:45:48.5]

This is a seat behind the curtain, the curtain came down here, and these are fascinating, these boxes. I did a lot of research in finding out about them, and these I discovered are where the really special people sat. The Opera Director for example would come up here with his guests, with his distinguished guests, musicians and visitors from other countries. And they would be on top of the performance, which is taking place under their noses. If they were here, they were on the level, same level as the dancers. If they were here, they were above the dancers, but there was even a box above, where you could be on top of the dancers, looking straight down.

Now, by the 1880s Degas was so well-known, so well-connected to the opera, we know that he could have gone backstage occasionally and had that view. So it's possible that he is showing us here, the view, this very, very exclusive view, on stage looking down on top of the dancers' heads.

(I have jumped ahead a little bit here.) But having said all of that, we can't get away from the fact that the pastel is almost unreadable to somebody who hasn't had this explanation. We have no information about what's going on, about the production, but we are shown an extraordinarily bizarre view of the ballet. Just as if you went to the theatre and you saw the tops of the actors' head, you would think it was really strange.

And Degas has chosen the most obtuse, the most perverse place to present the ballet from. And once more, we have to ask in Valery's terms,

well, what is the problem, he'd set himself here, what is he playing? And it sounds fantastical though it sounds, it is almost as if Degas had said, "well, I wonder if I can make a ballet picture from a view that nobody has ever seen before."

[00:47:57.2]

I wonder if I can show a ballet image which tells you nothing about the production at all, but draws attention to the dancers, and then I think this is fascinating possibility that he draws attention to the art, to the art making, to the looking at what the artists has done. In other words, you are looking at the mathematical solution to the mathematical problem.

And I think that brings us much closer to the Valery, the Degas that Valery knew, the man who loved problems and loved coming out with extraordinary solutions to them. In this picture which is about the ballet but we don't know what the ballet is, and it's a ballet that nobody had seen then and people still don't see today.

So in that sense, the DMA happens to have two of the most extraordinary answers to Valery's own question. I must move along now. And talk very briefly about this fascinating little picture that's also in the collection. It's a painting I have always been very fond of, but in truth it's not a good illustration of Valery's claims.

This was made in the 1890s, so we've moved forward another decade, and Degas is now approaching 60 and it does seem as if Degas has come full circle, because once again we are back with the world of *Semiramis*. We get the whole stage, we get the setting very clearly refined for us, this is a Greek Temple, so this is a ballet set in Ancient Greece [*Group of Dancers*, 1985.R.25].

We see the dancers front the front, that beautifully performing for our benefit. We are not looking at the tops of their heads, and it's truly a very conventional image as such. There is enough information here to identify to some extent the ballet in the 1890s, there were several ballets based on classical themes.

[00:49:59.4]

Polyeucte was one of them and *Sylvia* was another one. The image on the right that I am showing you is from the ballet *Sylvia*. It doesn't correspond exactly I realize that. But it's that kind of classical revival which was so interesting in the arts in the 1890s seems to be the setting.

So we even know the kind of context again, we are back to something legible and coherent.

A drawing that Jill identified for the first time, clearly a drawing for this dancer, originally conceived from behind, has her name at the bottom, so I can tell you the name of this dancer, she was called Louise Bouissavin, a minor dancer that Degas obviously used as a model and I can even charm you by showing you a photograph of her. Here she is, isn't she lovely?

So we are getting information upon information, more information that we can handle, but in this really rather old fashion sense in the terms I have been using. However, there has been a "however" in my description of each of these pictures, a big "but", it's what seems like a conventional picture is unconventional in one remarkable way.

This picture is painted, is executed in one of the most weirdest media that Degas ever used. It's executed in pastel, the yellow is pastel. Some of the drawing is in a fine paintbrush, but it's executed on a wooden panel.

Now artists often used wooden panels but they usually covered the wood. They usually put white paint over it, or they cover it so you can't see the wood.

[00:51:46.4]

Degas has chosen to leave the wood grain visible, and this is a signed picture, there is a signature down here, which tell us that it's a finished picture. And this -- once again Degas pulls the trick off, he surprises us, he shocks us because the warmth of the wood does weird things to the color of the dresses and the grain of the wood runs through, you can see here in this detail actually runs through, visibly runs through the dancers. And the result is it's a bit like an X-ray. These dancers look like wraiths or ghosts, they have no substance at all.

So Degas sort of subverts his own artifice, he subverts his own skills by carefully rendering these dancers and then just turning them into ghosts. So even in this late work he is still at work, his mind is still busy, he is still trying to catch us out, still trying to make us think just as he thought himself.

I thought rather than ending on this, rather curious picture, to be fair to Degas, I should end on this, because I didn't want you to go away thinking that Degas sort of faded away at the end of his career. That's absolutely not the case.

I've become a big champion of Degas' late career, and you noticed I am doing an exhibition about Degas and Picasso next year, because Degas lives into the 20th century. Degas was living in Montmartre when Picasso was there, when Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Degas was about half a mile away and we know that Picasso and his friends saw Degas in the street. So Degas was not off the scene at all.

And I wanted to show you this utterly fabulous drawing, it's in Harvard, the Fogg, and you notice it's signed, the finished work by Degas probably made in the late 1890's, which I think is a totally great work of art, and as radical, as challenging, as problematic, as intelligent, as anything that Degas made in his career.

[00:53:56.6]

It's also non-sensical in certain ways, these ballet dancers who are busy sort of stretching and so forth and adjusting their costumes are naked. It's a complete paradox as a picture, and he did lots of pictures of naked dancers. So this girl who should be adjusting a strap is actually just holding her arm.

So the complexity, the radicalism of Degas' art continues right to the end. And it makes the point, I hope for you, that at this point Degas, the colleague of Paul Cezanne, the colleague of Paul Gauguin, the colleague of the young Picasso was still this radical, inventive artist at the turn of the century using ballet as his vehicle for exploring vision, for exploring art-making, for exploring the relationship between the artist and his audience. And that I think is -- if I leave you with anything, I would be happy to leave you with that. Thank you very much!

[Applause]

Heather MacDonald: [Inaudible: 00:55:17 - 00:55:37]

Richard Kendall: They are looking stunned.

Heather MacDonald: I see one question.

Richard Brettell: [Inaudible: 00:55:41 - 00:55:51, connection to Feneon?]

[00:55:50.8]

Richard Kendall: Oh, yes, yes, yes. No, it's a nice connection. The second picture I showed you of the ballet dancers on stage was very interestingly and very brilliantly compared by one of the smartest critics of the period to a Hindu god, and an epileptic Hindu god even. And very nicely in the beginning of your exhibition you have exactly that kind of sculpture and something I discovered about ten years ago is that Degas, he owned a small version of that. He had a least one in his studio seen there by a fellow artist.

So that connection may again not be coincidental; it may be something that Degas sort of planted in the picture for those like Fénéon and Richard Brettell who pick those kinds of things up.

Audience Member: The scroll of the bass seemed to be placed very odd, because if you had an orchestra, the bass wouldn't be there. So I take it maybe he is hiding the [inaudible] with them.

Richard Kendall: What an ingenious theory. I like your theory. You are right on both counts. It's another case where Degas is playing around with reality in order to make a work of art. You are absolutely right. You have to be in a very strange position if it's at all possible for a double bass head to obscure your view of the stage.

Though, interestingly Degas does that in a lot of his pictures. It's an idea that he liked and was borrowed by other artists. But I've never actually tested it out at the opera to see if it was possible in the 19th century, but it's a very good point.

Audience Member: [Inaudible: 00:57:44 - 00:58:00]

[Applause]