**The Life of Edgar Degas**

Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas was born in Paris in 1834. He was the son of Auguste De Gas, a French banker, and Celéstine Musson, a French Creole from New Orleans. A founder of the Impressionist group, Edgar Degas spent most of his artistic life in Paris. Degas had a strong affection for his family and he came to New Orleans in the fall of 1872 to visit his maternal, American relatives. He spent about five months in the growing port city.

Auguste De Gas, Edgar's father, was an Italian-born banker who had moved to Paris in the 1830's from Naples, Italy. Auguste De Gas changed the family name spelling from Degas to De Gas in order to appear more aristocratic by indicating a name derived from land holdings. Edgar went back to using the original spelling sometime after the 1870's.

Auguste De Gas met Celéstine Musson in Paris. Edgar Degas's mother, Celéstine, was born into a prominent New Orleans family. Her father, Germain Musson, fled uprisings in Saint Domingue (Haiti), settled in New Orleans, and became a real estate developer. Musson had a family and a successful career in New Orleans. In 1819 Germain Musson moved the family to Paris following the death of the children’s mother, Marie Celeste Rillieux. Michel, Germain’s eldest son, returned to New Orleans to begin a career in cotton (Michel was also the Postmaster of New Orleans for some time); Celéstine and her other siblings remained in Paris. Celéstine married her neighbor Auguste De Gas in Paris in 1832.

Edgar Degas was the eldest of five children, born in 1834. In 1847, when Degas was thirteen, his mother died. Degas’s father had an interest in art and exposed his children to the old masters at the Louvre when they were young. Degas received his first formal education at Lycée Louis-le-Grand, where he received his Baccalaureate in 1853. That same year he was granted permission to copy artworks at the Louvre, a common practice among aspiring artists. Degas said, "The masters must be copied again and again, and only after having given every indication of being a good copyist can you reasonably be given leave to draw a radish from nature." He also worked in a studio he set up in his father's house.

In an attempt to appease his father, Degas enrolled in law school in 1853 but he dropped out soon thereafter. Although he rejected a law career preferred by his father, Degas retained the support of his father when he decided to become an artist. Many of his father's friends were art collectors or musicians which perhaps encouraged the support for Degas’s painting career. Degas admired the work of the neo-classical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. He agreed with the emphasis Ingres placed on the value of drawing. Ingres believed drawing was fundamental to the creation of art.

In 1856 Degas traveled to Italy to copy great masters of Italian painting. This had been a typical component of a French artist’s training since the 17th century. He spent the winter of 1858 in Florence with the Bellellis, his aunt and uncle (his father's sister and her husband), and began to make drawings for their family portrait. During this time in Italy, Degas also flirted with history painting. Degas's increasing confidence and skills are evident in his notebooks from this period. The notebooks document Degas's habit of making numerous studies for his painting.

When Degas returned to Paris in 1859 he began to take a greater interest in contemporary subjects rather than history painting. His shift to more modern subjects may have been inspired by fellow artist Édouard Manet, who became an important friend to Degas. Degas began to focus on the modern world around him: the theater, circus, cafés, bathers, ballerinas, dancers, and the racetrack. Degas was a member of a circle of artists who were committed to depicting the modern world. These artists later would be known as the Impressionists. Degas became active in this artistic circle and helped organize the first Impressionist exhibition, known at first as the exhibition of the Independents. He showed works in seven of the eight Impressionist exhibitions from 1874 to 1886. The Impressionists tended to represent everyday life through works that captured a single moment. Many painted outside, capturing the changing natural light of the outdoors instead of artificial studio light. Unlike some of the Impressionists, Degas stayed true to his traditional background in some ways, retaining the practice of sketching subjects before producing a painting. He also preferred to work in the studio rather than outdoors, perhaps because of his eye problems.

In the early 1860’s Degas traveled to Bourg-en-Bresse, France to visit his aunt and cousins who had fled the tribulations of Union occupation of New Orleans during the Civil War. Degas's Aunt Odile (Mme. Michel Musson) and two of her daughters, Estelle and Désirée, stayed in Bourg-en-Bresse from 1863-1865. Not only were the women in exile from New Orleans, they were mourning the recent death of Estelle's husband in the American Civil War at the Battle of Corinth. Degas and his siblings attempted to cheer their American relatives up by visiting them and taking them sightseeing. In 1865, Degas executed an expressive portrait of them, *Mme. Michel Musson and Her Two Daughters*.

In 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War began, Degas joined the National Guard to defend Paris from the oncoming Prussian army. He joined the artillery after finding out that his worsening eyesight prevented him from serving in the infantry.

Two years later, after the siege of Paris and the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War, Edgar Degas traveled to New Orleans with his brother René in 1872. René had gone to seek his fortune in New Orleans, joining his Uncle Michel Musson’s cotton firm and living with the Musson family. Shortly after, Achille, Degas’s other brother, formed a partnership with René in New Orleans. René married his cousin Estelle Musson in 1869. In the summer of 1872, René visited Paris on business and convinced Edgar to return to New Orleans with him for a family visit. Degas's five-month stay in New Orleans was a significant period of transition for him. He found the city of New Orleans fascinating. He lived in his Uncle Michel Musson’s rented mansion on Esplanade Avenue. Degas spent his time executing portraits of family members. He also depicted the local cotton business in New Orleans in two significant paintings.

Degas returned to Paris in the spring of 1873. His father died a year later, leaving the family with large debts and financial obligations to the family business. These burdens increased the pressure on Degas to sell his work. It was the first time he had been forced to make a living from painting. He began to experiment with new techniques and new subjects. Regardless of the subject matter, Degas maintained a desire for truth in his work.

As Degas's eyesight continued to decline, he preferred to work more with pastels, which were easier to work with than oils. He began to reduce the variety of his technique and subject matter and his compositions became more simplified. He used vibrant colors and gestures in place of precise details or lines in his work. He was virtually blind in the last years of his life. He died September 27, 1917, and was buried in the family vault in Paris.

**Edgar Degas in New Orleans**

Edgar Degas and his brother René arrived in New York in October of 1872 after a ten-day ocean journey from Europe. The brothers then traveled by train to New Orleans and arrived at the Pontchartrain Railroad Depot on October 28th, 1872. Michel Musson, Degas's uncle, his three daughters, Désirée, Estelle, Mathilde and Mathilde's husband, William Bell, and six children were there to greet the two men. Degas reported, "My uncle looked at me over his spectacles; my cousins, their six children were there. The surprise that René had planned for them by not saying that I was with him failed; as there had been some talk of yellow fever still persisting at New Orleans he had telegraphed to Achille asking if that meant there would be any danger for a stranger, and the cat was out of the bag."

Edgar Degas stayed with this uncle and cousins during his five-month stay. The Musson’s rented a house on Esplanade Avenue near to the French Quarter. Michel Musson lived on the first floor with his daughter Désirée, or Didi as she was called by the family. Degas made his studio in this part of the house. René, his wife Estelle, and their children lived on the second floor as did Mathilde and her family. Degas’s brother, Achille, lived in the French Quarter.

René and Achille had an import/export business in New Orleans called De Gas Brothers. Michel Musson was a partner in a cotton factoring firm just around the corner from De Gas Brothers on Carondelet Street. Michel’s firm was called Musson, Prestidge, and Co.; it was in an area called “Factors Row.” Every day, Degas would walk to the offices of De Gas Brothers to check his mail and read the newspaper.

The city of New Orleans amazed Degas. He wrote in a letter:

*Everything attracts me here….I like nothing better than the black women of all shades, holding in their arms little white babies, so white, against white houses with columns of fluted wood and in gardens of orange trees, and ladies in muslin against the fronts of their little houses, and steamboats with two chimneys as tall as factory chimneys and the fruit vendors with their shops full to bursting, and the contrast between the lively hum and bustle of offices and this vast dark animal force….*

Degas spent most of his time in the house on Esplanade Avenue. "All day long I am among these dear folk, painting and drawing, making portraits of the family.” At this time Degas's eyesight was troubling him. Unable to paint outdoors because of the intense light, he mostly painted in his studio in the Musson’s house.

The family conducted musical affairs in the Esplanade mansion. This was a popular pastime among Creole families. Two of Degas's favorite diversions in Paris were the opera and the ballet, neither of which he saw during his stay in New Orleans. The New Orleans Opera was closed for the winter of 1872 for financial reasons due to the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Degas regretted the absence of the opera, but he was able to listen to songs sung by his American cousins. In *The Song Rehearsal*, Degas portrays two women singing with emotion and animation as the pianist plays in the corner.

Degas painted the portrait of his cousin and sister-in-law, Estelle Musson, called *Portrait of Estelle Musson De Gas*, which is now owned by the New Orleans Museum of Art. Estelle was stricken with an eye disorder in 1866. Degas's own anxiety about his eyes augmented his compassion towards her. Estelle was mostly blind by 1872, and Degas was slowly becoming blind. In the painting, Estelle is shown pregnant. Degas emphasizes Estelle’s sense of touch as she fingers the gladiolas that she arranges in the vase.

Degas depicted several events of the household during his stay in New Orleans. *Children on a Doorstep* is both a genre painting and a family portrait of his nieces and nephews sitting at the open back door of the Musson house. *Woman on a Balcony* depicts Estelle's sister Mathilde Musson Bell on the veranda of the Esplanade mansion. Women in 19th century New Orleans often spent their social time in the private spheres of the balconies of New Orleans homes.

The Musson household had its share of illnesses; many of the Musson and Bell children would die in the 1870’s and 80’s. Before Degas arrived in New Orleans there was a threat of a Yellow Fever outbreak. The fear of illness was always around. In addition to the threat of epidemics, Estelle had a baby during Degas’s stay and there were many children in the household. Degas painted many events that went on in the Musson house including the illnesses and the pregnancy of Estelle.

In addition to the portraits painted in the Musson house, Degas ventured to his uncle’s business for subject matter. Degas's uncle, Michel Musson, and his business partners were cotton factors in Musson, Prestidge, and Co. The cotton factor served as agent, banker, storekeeper, and confidante to his clients, the cotton planters. Degas painted *A Cotton Office in New Orleans*, a mixture of genre and portraiture set in his uncle's office. He had hoped to sell the painting to a cotton merchant in England, but instead it was exhibited in the Second Impressionist Exhibition in 1876 along with *Children on a Doorstep*. This work depicts fourteen people engaged in various tasks of the everyday world of the cotton business. Seated in the front of the office is Michel Musson inspecting cotton, while René De Gas is seated behind him reading *The Daily Picayune*. The figure leaning against the window on the left is Degas's brother, Achille. Perhaps the two brothers would not have taken on such a leisurely air if they were in their own office. Other partners and business associates carry on the daily business by sorting cotton, rating it, and keeping the books. It is a genre painting in that it depicts the everyday activities of the cotton business. It is also a corporate portrait painting depicting specific businessmen, partners, and associates in their work setting.

The dissolution of Musson's firm was announced in *The Daily Picayune* of February 1, 1873. René could in fact be reading the announcement of the closure of the firm in the newspaper. Like many brokerage firms, that of Degas's uncle’s was unable to survive the difficult post-war period in New Orleans. A depression had hit New Orleans in the winter of 1873 in the midst of Reconstruction. In addition, many cotton factors were being replaced by shopkeepers and middlemen who set up their businesses closer to the old plantations. *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* was ultimately bought by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Pau, France. The painting was the only one of Degas’s works to be bought by a museum during his lifetime. It was also the first Impressionist painting to be sold to a museum.

Degas produced a second painting of the same subject during his stay in New Orleans, *Cotton Merchants in New Orleans*. This work depicts a well-dressed merchant behind a cotton-strewn table with two other figures in the background. Though it shares a common subject matter with his previous work, *Cotton Merchants* foreshadows Degas's later Impressionistic technique and style. The work is light and airy and uses bold, flat colors and strong diagonals. The colors and diagonal lines are similar to those used in Japanese prints. In a letter describing this work, Degas called the painting "better art." In contrast to the photographic naturalistic quality of *Cotton Office in New Orleans, Cotton Merchants* is more suggestive of the spontaneous handling of gesture and use of light that is characteristic of the Impressionists.

Degas returned to Paris in February or March of 1873. In the fall of that year, the Paris Opera House burned, depriving Degas of another season of one of his favorite pastimes. In February of 1874 Degas's father died in Naples, leaving the family in great debt. This put a great financial strain on Degas and his brothers. After the New Orleans trip, Degas ceased contact with his New Orleans relatives for many reasons. Mainly, contact stopped because René left Estelle for another woman a few years after Degas’s New Orleans trip. Both sides of the family were extremely upset by the situation. It was then that Degas ceased letters and contact with his American relatives. He kept most of his New Orleans paintings in his studio in Paris throughout his lifetime.

**Estelle Musson Degas**

Estelle Musson Degas was the sister-in-law and first cousin of Edgar Degas. She was married to Edgar’s brother René. The artist painted her portrait in New Orleans in 1872. Estelle is shown in an intimate scene arranging flowers by touch. She was going blind at this time and Degas had great empathy for her. He was also having difficulty with his own eyesight. He wrote in a letter to a friend, “My poor Estelle, René’s wife, is blind as you know. She bears it in an incomparable manner; she scarcely needs any help about the house. She remembers the rooms and the positions of the furniture and hardly ever bumps into anything.” His empathy and admiration for her reveal themselves in the delicate treatment of his subject and the flowers she is arranging.

Estelle occupies the entire height of the canvas. Both her head and skirt are slightly cropped--a characteristic common in photography. Degas was intrigued by the often random cropping of photographs and subsequently often used this device in his own work. Estelle’s face is almost in silhouette with her left side in complete shadow and the right in clear detail. Her white collar and black hair gently frame her face.

The bright, red, yellow and green hues of the gladiolas contrast greatly with Estelle’s darkened figure. The dark tones of her dress are repeated in the table top, her hair and the background. These dark, solid colors offset the green that appears in the background of the canvas.

Another eye-catching device is Degas’s use of the diagonal edge of the table. This line leads the viewer’s eye to the arrangement of flowers as her right hand delicately touches a gladiola stem. Since she cannot see, the sense of touch dominates her life. As Degas noted, “She has mastered her misfortune.” Estelle’s left thumb and index finger pinch a small white flower as if she were about to lift it off the table and place it within the large arrangement. The portrait allows a glimpse into the world of Estelle Musson Degas as she performs a daily task. The sketchiness of the brown background and the green vista demonstrate Degas’s adherence to the general principles of Impressionism--capturing scenes from everyday life and the artist’s inclusion of short, quick brushstrokes.

**Impressionism**

The Impressionist movement began in France in the 1860’s with a group of artists who shared a desire to depart from the French academic tradition. This group of artists tended to use similar techniques, styles, and influences that group them together. The industrialization of Paris, the recent advances in photography, and Japanese prints are among the influences which led to the development of this style.

During the 19th century, industry was growing and new technology led to the emergence of the railroad and provided new jobs. The train made it possible for an increasing number of Parisians to spend their weekends outside of the city in suburbs to enjoy outdoor activities and escape the crowded city. Paris was being revitalized with the widening of boulevards, the emergence of the department store, and new municipal buildings. Parisians spent more time on the streets and in the cafés eating, drinking, and socializing. The emergence of the bourgeoisie and the increased opportunities for the lower classes led to more social mixing in the public arena.

The official Salon in Paris set the precedent for appropriate subject matter and technique. The Salon was established in the 17th century and was the authority on French art. The Salon's annual show exhibited works by the "who's who" of the French art world. The prevailing style endorsed by the Salon was traditional and very conservative with a preference for Biblical, literary, and historical subject matter. The Impressionists were united by a desire to abandon traditional subject matter and technique and paint contemporary subjects such as the café, café-concert, racetrack, prostitutes, milliners, women and landscapes. Although their techniques varied, many of the Impressionists sought to portray spontaneity, or a fleeting moment in time. Principal Impressionist painters were Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Frédéric Bazille, Mary Cassatt, and Edgar Degas.

The Impressionists renounced the traditionally favored techniques of the Salon such as linear perspective, balanced composition and idealized subject matter.They turned their back on the traditional literary or historical scenes. Most artists preferred to paint outdoors, or in *plein-air*, in order to capture the true natural light and portray its changing qualities in nature. The Impressionists exploited the discovery that color changes according to the effects of light and attempted to portray this phenomenon. The modern method of packaging paint in tubes allowed the artists to conveniently carry their paints wherever they went. It enabled artists to easily execute works outside of the studio.

Japanese prints and photographs also inspired the Impressionists. Japanese prints had been introduced into France as packing material for Japanese goods. The bold, flat colors and the unusual balance of the composition were new to Western eyes. Many of the Impressionists were inspired by these works that were outlined in sharp black lines and lacked Western style of linear perspective.

Cropping techniques used by photographers were also exploited by many Impressionists. These artists strove for the effects of spontaneity in their works. Photography’s emergence led to a greater acceptance of unbalanced and off-set compositions. This new appearance of photography and realism in a sense freed painters from the responsibility of reproducing the “real” world.

The *avant-garde* group gathered at the Café Guerbois in Paris to discuss matters of the day and the new ways of painting. Although some of the artists' works were accepted into the official Salon, many were rejected. This group of outsiders was animated about their work and they wanted to be able to show their works in an open forum. At the time, the official Salon was the only widely recognized art exhibition held in Paris. The Impressionists decided to form their own exhibition to challenge the traditional ways of the Salon. Degas initially called the group "The Realists" to empahsize their interest in painting every-day scenes of modern life.

In 1873, after his return from New Orleans, Degas and other artists formed the Société Anonyme des Artistes, a group that was devoted to free, non-juried exhibitions, and the publication of a journal. The first exhibition of the Société Anonyme des Artistes opened in April of 1874. One art critic introduced the term “Impressionist" as a derogatory description of Monet’s painting *Impression: Sunrise* from the exhibition. The name stuck and the group was called the Impressionists. The group organized eight independent shows from 1874-1886.

Although Degas was considered an Impressionist and exhibited works in the exhibitions, his style varied from the typical Impressionist artist. He shared the common desire to paint modern life and genre scenes but he preferred to work in his studio rather than in the *plein-air* technique preferred by the other Impressionists. One reason for this was his failing eyesight. He often painted from memory, had live models in his studio, or used clay maquettes for modeling.

Degas was trained as a classical draftsman due to his early devotion to Ingres and his time in Italy. He was an observer of humanity and wanted works to seem natural and spontaneous. His figures are often enigmatic and leave the viewer wanting to know more about them. Facial expressions and gestures were very important to him. His work seemed to be derived with the spontaneity of other Impressionist works, but his painting was controlled and deliberate. Degas said, "no art was ever less spontaneous than mine. A picture is an artificial work.... It calls for as much cunning as the commission of a crime.