

Ballet of Paris Opera by E. Degas in the Light of Its Popularisation as Art and Interpretation of the Artist's Creative Method

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the interpretation of the dance theme in the work of famous French artist E. Degas (1834-1917) in connection with the development of the Paris Opera's ballet theatre. The main objective of the study is to determine the main trends in the development of the French artistic culture of the late 19th century; in addition, it aims to study the time of E. Degas's life and work, analyse his works on ballet themes, understand the artist's method under the direct influence of the artistic system of the era, and the French classical dance; to identify the features of the interpretation of the ballet theme by E. Degas within the impressionistic trend opposing academicism and formulate its historical significance. His work introduces new forms of dialogue and communication into the sphere of the interaction of related arts. The author demonstrates that the artist's works, despite the general theme, solve various creative tasks in the sphere of the impressionist image method. Also, they form the artistic consciousness that requires creativity necessary to develop search thinking in the image of the backstage life of dancers. Having studied works in museum collections, the author formulates the main dynamic characteristics of the created artistic images of the ballet and their unique identity. Determined that his drawings contain mathematics and pictorial ease at an equal rate. Muted, but expressive details develop the atmosphere of his paintings, where everything is rather simple, people are reserved, and their feelings are hidden from the eyes of others.

Keywords: Choreography, Ballet of Paris Opera, Impressionist Method, Pictorial Systems, Choreographic Images

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Introduction

At present, choreography, its importance in the society and reflection in the art draws much attention. Nevertheless, the 19th-century French ballet in Russian science has not been sufficiently studied. E. Degas is considered the first artist of the world in whose oeuvre the theme of ballet occupied a significant place and formed a subjective view on the art of dance. The objective of the article is to trace the creative activity of E. Degas in the interpretation of the theme of dance; to identify and analyse the creative method of the artist using his significant works; to prove the value of his artistic works in the popularisation of ballet as an art. The creative personality of E. Degas was studied by V. Kryuchkov (Kryuchkova, 2003), R. Torres (Torres, 2006), partially by A. Vishnevsky (Vishnevsky, 1993) and E. Ivanova (Ivanova, 2010). Journalism articles on E. Degas's works belong to M. Gerstein (Gerstein, 1982), T. Rassieur (Rassieur, 2011), etc. In western art studies, E. Degas's oeuvre is often the theme of books, articles and essays. The authors whose works contributed to a deeper and fuller acquaintance with his works should be particularly noted: F. Henry (Giese, 1978), J. DeVonyar (De Vonyar and Kendall, 2007), R. Kendall (Gerstein, 1982), T. Reff (Reff, 1971).

A significant contribution to the study of E. Degas's works was made by the well-known Russian art critic V. Prokofiev (Prokofiev, 1982; Prokofiev, 1971). It is he who has analysed many works of the artist including those dedicated to the dance. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the ballet theme in the works by E. Degas in comparison with the development of French choreography has not yet been studied separately. The existing studies usually touch upon the issues of the artist's personality, his world outlook; some studies are dedicated to art criticism and indicate imagery and content of the works. The problems of the formation of the artist's personality, his worldview in connection with his understanding of the specificity of the ballet theme as a creative process, the internal

spiritual potential inherent in it, as well the conceptual and theoretical ideas of choreography are considered rare.

The article uses the studies on the impressionism in art by M. Alpatov (Alpatov, 1972), N. Brodskaya (Brodskaya, 2002), M. Dyakova (Dyakova, 1998), V. Zhidkov (Zhidkov and Sokolov, 2003), T. Martyshkina (Martyshkina, 2008), O. Reutersverd (Reutersvard, 1974), T. Kotelnikova (Kotelnikova, 2009), O. Kochik (Kochik, 1975), E. and L. Kuznetsova (Kuznetsova, 2012; Kuznetsova, 2000), S. Roger-Marx (Roger-Marx, 1956), M. Serullaz (Serullaz, 1959), and as well as collections of essays (Chegodaev, 1975). Today, despite the relatively large number of works devoted to impressionism, the problem of studying this artistic direction in the context of E. Degas's dance imagery remains topical.

Using the sources of the ballet theatre, the graphics and pictorial works of the artist, created at different periods are considered by S. Gagarin (Gagarina, 2014), V. Krasovskaya (Krasovskaya, 2008a; Krasovskaya, 2008b). The source and methodological basis of the article are the works by E. Degas devoted to ballet stored in many museums around the world. Besides, by now the art history has already formed a solid iconography of his artistic heritage, published in the form of exhibitions and various collections. This material was also useful (Liebermann and Stokes, 1900; Loyrette, 1998; Giese, 1978; Pantazzi, 1988; Sutherland, 1985).

The need for interdisciplinary analysis of the ballet art of the second half of the 19th century, reflected in the works by E. Degas, is determined by the very complex nature of the phenomenon under consideration, including the cultural, art, spiritual and practical spheres of cognition. The problem is that all researches in the field related to the artist are characterised by fragmentary or specialised consideration of the problem from one particular side. The need for a comprehensive integration study of ballet and painting of E. Degas has not yet been realised. The interdisciplinary nature of the topic of the

article makes it possible to involve a wide range of issues that cover not only methodological but also substantive aspects. Adjacent synthesis of painting and ballet orientates us at gaining new knowledge about the visual images of performers, choreographers, the production process, rehearsals and performances in the ballet theater of the second half of the 19th century, as well as the technical equipment of the stage of the Paris Opera, decoration and costume design of that time.

E. Degas' Creative Method and Its Features

In the history of painting, E. Degas is the only artist who created paintings on the theme of ballet throughout his life. He was engaged in his favourite occupation, merging into it completely, paying attention to every detail in the paintings and striving to ensure that his drawings were innovative, not similar to each other and not similar to the works of other masters.

A ballet of his contemporary era influenced the development of the theme of dance of E. Degas. In the second half of the 19th century. In the country of E. Degas, in France, the ballet became too conservative, with well-worked-out schemes and techniques, it lost touch with the ideas of that time. These directions conventionally developed in two planes of interpretation of the dance theme: academicism was more burdensome for showing dance classes, lessons and rehearsals, while romanticism was most often manifested in the depiction of stage performances and was only occasionally seen in pictures showing the production process for the creation of plays. In 1859, after his return to Paris, J. Perrot, the master of the romantic ballet, reappeared in the Opera but a new role. It was the time when he began his pedagogical activities. In many of his paintings, E. Degas depicts J. Perrot, who was nicknamed Mentor by the ballet youth. E. Degas depicts him in his role of a romantic Belotunik ballet, among groups of dancers in a class and stage rehearsals dressed in long skirts with a bodice and tied at the waist with bows. E. Degas captured the last echoes of romanticism on the French stage because this

era was already disappearing: the public wanted to see entertaining, not serious ideas. New productions were not offered by the choreographer J. Perrot to the theatre management. Some paintings by E. Degas reflect this new dance trend in the genre of musicals and cabaret. The next main choreographer was M. Petipa. This French ballet dancer arrived in Russia in 1847 where he created famous ballets – Swan Lake, Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty – which became the pinnacles of classical symphonic choreography and made Russia the centre of choreographic culture.

Special attention in E. Degas's oeuvre is given to the French Opera with its interiors, rehearsal rooms and stage. The artist was a regular visitor of both the theatrical scenes and the ballerinas' training halls. He was the first to reflect the professional dynamics of the movements of classical choreography in his paintings, to apply the impressionism methods to depict enclosed spaces. E. Degas created about 600 images of ballerinas now stored in museum collections and private collections. When asked why he liked to draw ballet, E. Degas said: "They call me a painter of dancers, but they do not understand that the dancers have served me as an excuse to draw beautiful fabrics and convey movements". The study of nature and the best artistic heritage of the ancient period, as well as the sculptural masterpieces of Michelangelo, led to the development of a specific method that was brilliantly realised in the artist's works. They are a focus on the main line and the idea without excessive detailing, change of the reality to greater expressiveness, a generalisation of the image and its development into an expressive silhouette with simultaneous expression of movement. "In fact, it is extremely difficult to control your body in space accurately, rhythmically and expressively, and even keep the balance at the same time. Only a few of us could compete with professional dancers, but the whole art of dance exists within our physical abilities provided by nature" (Brown and Parson, 2008: 30). To depict a ballet for E. Degas means to watch, observe and see the very essence. Due

to the regular visit to the Paris Opera, the artist opened the backstage world, the world of ballet and the world of people, beautiful and contradictory. He entered this world, felt to be united with it forever. "Dancers in the Rehearsal Room" are numerous backstage pastel drawings by E. Degas. An observed short moment of the ballet everyday life; wooden stairs, under which the artist probably worked; the figures of dancers cut off by the edge of the canvas are E. Degas's favourite techniques. Taken together, they create the impression of an accidental, not rehearsed glance, capture reality without an attempt to idealise something, to order or to lead to harmony. However, this impression is deceptive. E. Degas thought through and arranged the compositions of his works with the accuracy of a draftsman or architect.

His drawings contain mathematics and pictorial ease at an equal rate. Alongside the Paris Opera, the artist sketched in ballet schools, but more often invited young dancers to his studio and created many sketches before he could find an expressive perspective or the necessary pose. He worked on the tracing paper, overlaying new sheets on top of the drawn ones, and changing the contour he achieved the desired accuracy. Even those rare drawings with dancers on the stage or during the rehearsal depict them in borderline moments: when bowing, listening to remarks, preparing for the dance. It should be noted that the artist's interpretation of the appearance of dancers is often far from ideal shapes and proportions: short necks, ugly legs, short torso and squat figures. Within the given topic, he seeks conflict rather than calming harmony, feels the interrelation of dancers. The artist has his own style of expression which is often the most characteristic feature of his works. However, visual entertainment is not always accompanied by a surprise and unusualness of the depicted reality. In fact, his best works combine both components.

Composition and perspective in ballet works by E. Degas

The most important point of the esthetic program of E. Degas was the exceptional attention to the pictorial side in the format of the paintings. The visual resources of his view are more capacious when compared with the recently prevailing narrative nature of academic realism. The academic style of painting was always strictly regulated. Observing the characters, the artist comes close to them or moves away without distracting or dissipating spectator's attention. These moments reveal E. Degas as a master of the space solutions. Space does not mean closure, on the contrary, it comes to life when a picture or a piece of life imprinted on a film tells what is beyond the limits of the frame – on the right, on the left, at the bottom, above. V. Prokofiev notes: "In the shattered world of Degas, a person physically cannot maintain a central position. The spatial environment throws him aside; shifts him down the inclined plane, creating even an impression of his possible fall out of the canvas ... Let's remember at least three versions of "The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage" from the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre Museum (c.1873-1874), or two versions of "The Dance Class" from the Louvre and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington (c.1875-1876), or "Dance Lesson. Rehearsal Class" from the Mellon collection in Upperville (c. 1880-1885)" (Prokofiev, 1971).

The "Dance Lesson" (1876, Musee d'Orsay, Paris) recorded a routine episode of the life of the Paris Opera. In the centre stands the choreographer Jules Perrot, the idol of the era of the romantic ballet, which reminds of the fact that the very art of ballet is modern and was created in the 19th century by dancers like he. The sense of randomness of composition and careless scatter of figures is deceptive. The bold perspective 'from the height' seems to retreat diagonally, isolating the choreographer standing just to the right of the centre, surrounded by a disorderly group of novice ballerinas. They are crowding around the

teacher, waiting for their turn. They are depicted with a full set of natural poses and gestures for the given situation: they are thinking about something, adjusting their bodices and skirts. The atmosphere of everyday life is supported by empirical observation, where prosaic facts are intertwined with apocryphal details: a watering can, a dog, etc. The example is his famous "The Star" (c. 1878) in Louvre; or the strikingly cropped "Lowering the Curtain" from the Boston collection of Metcalf (1880). Other examples are his numerous variations on the theme of resting dancers ("Dancers in Foyer. Before the Dance", c. 1897, San Francisco, Lazar collection; "Dancers at Rest", c. 1881-1883, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; "Dancer Tying Her Shoe Ribbons" c. 1896, Cleveland, Art Museum). All these viewpoints are not only pre-excluding any representation but also to some extent ironic about the person depicted, although this irony does not exclude the possibility of empathy" (Prokofiev, 1971: 115-116). "Dancer Posing for a Photographer" (1878, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts) is another interesting picture of E. Degas from the point of perspective. It seems that the ballerina is posing not for him and looking in the opposite direction, at an unseen photographer. This focus is disadvantageous and unfavourable for her. This is the back of the photographic gloss for which she is doing her best. From this purer side, she tries to freeze in a demonstrative pose. The result is something complicated, turned inside out, "someone else's leg" and "upturned face". This unforeseen point of view makes it easier to imagine a real everyday ballet life: rubbed fingers, aching legs, routine boredom, years of rehearsals and hopes of big roles from this very side that the artist captures the ballet most often. It should be noted that the unusual construction of E. Degas's compositions was supplemented by his experimental approach to materials, the combination of monotype and pastel. In "The Star" mentioned, the effect of tipping the depth on the plane begins to prevail. In later paintings, for example, in Moscow's "Blue Dancers" (c. 1897), this process is completed.

The depth disappears or, to be more exact, is imprinted into the vertical field of the picture. "From now on, the way to the plane and actively facing outward pictures of the Fauvists, Matisse and the fundamentally appellative spatial and pictorial systems of the twentieth century, the newest time, has been opened" (Prokofiev, 1971: 117).

Movements and dance technique in works by E. Degas

The dancers became an obsessive passion for E. Degas, which he wanted to study endlessly, to render a set of expressive, repetitive movements, the rhythm of the life itself. Several variants of pictures with the decision of movement depending on the chosen plot can be distinguished. These are three groups of paintings and drawings to them: the motive of ballet and dance classes, where the dancers mechanically make their customary movements; the motive of the ballerinas at rest and them tying or correcting their shoe ribbons; the motive of rehearsals on stage; the motive of the dancers performing and the motive of the backstage preparation for the performance or expectation for the entrance on the stage — the first two groups of works: "Dancers at the Bar", 1905 (Phillips Collection, Washington, USA), "Dancers at the Bar. Etude", 1877 (British Museum, London), "Dancers Practicing at the Bar", 1877, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), "Dance Class", 1871 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), "Dance Lesson", 1879 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), etc. demonstrate a dance world closed to the uninitiated people: its prose, ballet is work, it is an icky everyday routine.

The dancers of E. Degas, shown in rehearsal rooms and dance classes, where for the hundredth and a thousandth time they do obligatory exercises at the bar, are depicted as if they are encased in a somewhat internally dryish, rational form, sometimes deliberately speculative and pointedly coldish. In some works, the exaggerated turn of the legs turns into caricature: "Two Dancers", 1899 (the Musee d'Orsay, Paris), "Dancers", 1901 (private

collection), "Dancers behind the Scenes" (St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Michigan, USA). In some groups of obstructing figures, a feeling of broken limbs is created. The ballerinas who have risen on points demonstrate enough mastered finger technique: "Ballet Stage", 1879, "Two dancers in the Studio. Dance School" (both in private collections), "Dancer on Pointe", 1878 (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, USA), "Greek Dance", 1889 (private collection). Ballerinas depicted in the air – "Battement" 1879, "Dancer Bending Down", 1883 (both in private collections) – allow a viewer to imagine the movement's elevation and the ability to hold a pose in space, but their perspective seems somewhat awkward like on old films with the dance of bygone eras. Dancers portrayed with objects – "Dancer with a Tambourine", 1882, (private collection), "Dancer with a Fan", 1880 (Metropolitan Museum, New York), "Dancer on Stage", 1890 (Hamburg, Germany) witness about the artist's ability to convey a characteristic image of the dance. From the viewpoint of rhythm transfer and synchronicity of the performance of the dance, the following works are interesting: "Dancers in Green", 1878, "Lowering the Curtain", 1880, "Three Dancers", 1898, "Dancers in Foyer", 1890 (all in private collections), "Three Dancers in Purple Skirts", 1898 (Phillips Collection, Washington, USA). The artist's perception of the life of dancers is seen as something forever determined. "Dancers Lace Their Shoes" (c. 1895 – 1898, Cleveland Museum, USA), "Dancer Adjusting Her Shoe" (1887, private collection), "Dancers at Rest", 1879. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA) and other works of E. Degas are sharp and almost ruthless in their truthfulness drawings.

Critic L. Haskell noted that E. Degas, most clearly of all artists, tells us the great truth about the ballet of his time, he can be called a documentary artist of the professional habits of dancers, he makes us look at the ballet with his eyes. Movements in the paintings of E. Degas have no strong dynamics, but they impress with the depth and amplitude of the performance.

The third and fourth group of works: "Ballet Rehearsal", 1875 (Nelson-Atkins, Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, USA), "Ballet Rehearsal on Stage", 1874. (Musée d'Orsay, France), "Dancers in Pink", 1885 (Hillstead Museum, CT, USA), "Dancers Behind the Scenes", 1883 (National Gallery, Washington, USA), "Rehearsal at the Opera", 1895 (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California, USA), etc. feature an additional technique used by the author: intensified contrast of light and shade on the stage and the overall shift in tonality. Being combined with the plot, these compositional models vary each time; they are inaccurate, approximate because of their strict application for a certain theatrical poetics: they are too slightly transformed to function organically in an aesthetic system alien to them. Such processing of the colour scale in many cases significantly increases the degree of influence of his works, gives magical originality to the embodied scenic reality, but does not go beyond the bounds of its realistic image.

Impressionist style and ballet image in works by E. Degas

With time, Degas begins to move away from scientific realism which reached its apogee in "Dancers on Stage", but his passionate love for the ballet itself only increases. Giving preference to pastels, which he sometimes supplemented with other materials, he cut off the figures, depicting chaotic clusters of groups of dancers in the form of bright colour spots, showing them only partially and at an oblique angle. E. Degas's friend engraver L. Lepik introduced the monotype technique to him in 1876, and Degas almost immediately modified it to his taste, achieving such interaction lines and colours, air fineness and freedom, which would be difficult to achieve using these techniques separately. In the tonal solution of his works, the artist proceeds from a colour gamma change the pattern often, the colour scheme interacts with the movement, as the key constant of the ballet profession. The examples are "Dancers in Pink", 1885 (Hillstead Museum), "Pink Dancer", 1898 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA),

“Dancers in Pink and Green”, 1890 (Metropolitan Museum, New York, CT, USA), “Three Dancers in Purple Skirts”, 1898 (Phillips Collection, Washington, USA). This makes the artist use different colour schemes. As a result, the artist receives everything he needs: unconstrained movements, casual poses, beautiful bodies, translucent festive fabrics, which are in stark contrast to the mood of the figures, and the opportunity to remain invisible. In the “Dancers in Blue, 1895 (Musee d’Orsay, Paris), “Four dancers”, 1902 (private collection), “Dancers” 1900 (Gallery, University of Rochester, USA) this solution includes realise that imply minimum conventionality in the reproduction of accurate everyday life, and at the same time it departs from such reproduction in costume and moves to sunny bright colours, to the carnival action. Moreover, the artistic dance image of E. Degas received the status of autonomy, of complete individual essence. Strong strokes and contrast comparisons give way to impressionistic attention to fleeting shades of states, plot dynamics. There is a feeling that dancers live on canvases unpredictably, arbitrarily, paradoxically. Degas’s favourite model changes completely: the distance from the ordinary to the extraordinary shrinks and reveals its turnaround metaphorical foundation. “The main features of the impressionistic vision are synthetics, subjectivity, immediacy, the desire for integrity and generalization, the absence of a central point of view” (Martyshkina, 2008). “Another feature of the impressionism art is “the disclosure of the object ... as one of the figures included in the general structure of the world which is subordinate to the universal rhythm” (Martyshkina, 2008).

The well-known pastel “Blue Dancers”, in 1897 (the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow) usually distinguished from the entire ballet cycle should be considered from this viewpoint. The painting seems to have nothing definitively settled. The dynamics of the circular dance does not exclude the perceptiveness of the artist’s view; the romance does not interfere with the sense of movement. The main emotional sounding of the image of E.

Degas’s dancers is concentrated in the rhythm of the corsage and tutus, in the kaleidoscope of naked backs and hands, exposed to bright sunlight, and therefore absorbing all the color reflexes from the environment, in pure pulsating spots of color, from the intensely dark in the shade and the light, almost whitened in the light, merging in one whole. It is difficult to determine what lies at the heart of the theme – reality or vision. The master’s later works, as well as his earlier works, feature the impression of a snapshot created, even in those pictures where there is no recorded movement, but everything is supplemented by the brightness of the colour sound, while poorly outlined forms are often more important to the artist than those clearly limited. All this proves a great role of style in E. Degas’s works.

Conclusion

E. Degas’s oeuvres had a strong influence on the development of the plastic art of almost all countries in the world. Later, many artists who referred to the theme of dance in graphics, painting and sculpture used his conceptual solutions. By the number and quality of the ballet works created, he is an unrivalled master of the French ballet of the Paris Opera.

We have considered only some of his works dedicated to the Terpsichore’s devotees: both to classes in which they received special and very hard education and performances in which they, dressed in completely different from ordinary costumes, had to depict some ethereal creatures. One group of works features severe, ascetic, grounded tone, while other works are sensual and enchanting. In both cases, we are exposed to really truthful situations that characterise the theatrical environment of the metropolitan theatre in all its manifestations.

The works of E. Degas are very significant for understanding the ballet of the second half of the 19th century. Thanks to this artist’s works, the ballet gained new popularity among the public of that time. We have the chance to imagine what dancers and dancer teachers of his era looked like, to merge into the

atmosphere of rehearsals and dance classes. Numerous drawings by E. Degas give the idea about the level of technique of classical dance, about the professional characteristics of the French national school and preferences in the choreographic images. Interiors, halls and the scene of the Paris Opera depicted in his works have preserved the ancient architecture of the famous theatre for descendants. This material is invaluable for both art criticism and ballet studies. The innovative approach of E. Degas made it possible to penetrate the backstage life and inaccessible corners of the scene. Features of the artist's creative method (compositional techniques, angle view and spatial solutions) moved viewers of his creations to the creative laboratory of classical dance and revealed its unusual beauty.

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