he knew to be an anachronism—social stasis—Degas eschewed what in most of his works was a critical response to contemporary life. In none of his other genre paintings was he so conservative. On the contrary, in those works the modern world tumbles in with all its contradictions.

Degas loved the ballet, as did many an artist of his time, and he painted it more than any other subject. In his *catalogue raisonné* on Degas, Paul-André Lemoisne lists six hundred such works. Degas probably knew they would sell well, for it was no secret that ballet dancers were popular. Beautiful, talented, and sexually independent, they were undeniably the type of woman about whom fantasies were made. Furthermore, many of the same people frequented both the ballet and the racetrack and were possible buyers for images of both. Jockey Club members, for example, had the choicest boxes at the Opéra and were among the best-known "protectors" of the dancers.

In addition, much like the racetrack, dance in the 1870s had a memorable and elitist history but an unimpressive, increasingly prosaic present. It is generally accepted by dance historians that, as Ivor Guest has written, "in the last three decades of the 19th century . . . [ballet] had lost its vitality.
and had sunk to the level of a minor form of entertainment." Boris Kochno, another dance critic, marveled that it was "during this epoch of decline that the ballet dancers found their painter [Degas]."

With dance, then, as with the racetrack, Degas selected to paint a social event of past grandeur, one that had dwindled, by the time he started to paint it, to the merest semblance of its former self. There was, apparently, something in the tension between past, but still resonating power and its contemporary prosaicizing if not dismantling, that attracted him. Clearly, it attracted others as well, for he made a living from the ballet and racing paintings. Both social phenomena provided brilliant prisms through which to see, dazzlingly and distinctly, molten aspects of contemporary social life. One might enjoy or be appalled by these events; Degas' ballet paintings responded both ways. But, as we shall see, they are much more consistently images of conflict than are the racing paintings.

Unlike dance today, which is an independent art form, ballet in the nineteenth century was performed almost exclusively as an accompaniment to opera. By the 1870s, ballet had become a variety of light musical entertainment. Some attribute the decline to the advent of toe shoes and the subsequent dwindling of men's roles, but probably more important was the disintegration of a discriminating audience. In any case the term "decline" refers to the art itself, not to its trappings—the glitter of Charles Garnier's Opéra, the building in which it was performed—not the pretentiousness of much of its audience.

"Garnier's Palace," as the Opéra was called, was an impressive, if also ostentatious building (fig. 40). It combined on its exterior a mélange of classical structure with baroque ornamentation, not unlike the Arc du Carrousel (1806–1807) and the 1850s addition to the Louvre. The Opéra's interiors shimmered with gilt, glass, and mirrors. Staircases poured from one story down to the next. Putti, angels, gods, and muses rolled across ceilings and walls; plush burgundy velvet draped the stage and cushioned the seats. August Bournoiville, the renowned nineteenth-century Danish choreographer, was amazed at this opulence and remarked that in the construction of the Opéra, "materials almost as costly as St. Peter's in Rome were used."

Foyers, staircases, loggias, and boxes provided endless locations in which to be seen, emphasizing that display was a raison d'être of the building's existence (figs. 41, 42). The main staircase, for example, was a perfect foil for the fabled French fashions of the day. So too were the enormous gold-encrusted grand foyer (fig. 43) and the more private but still penetrable boxes in the auditorium—eminently penetrable to judge from the myriad illustrations and paintings that exist
of men peering through binoculars into those boxes. Works such as Renoir's *The Loge* (fig. 5) or Degas' *The Ballet from Robert le Diable* (1872, Metropolitan Museum of Art) come to mind. Even the stage was raked, or tipped forward, in order to show more than would otherwise have met the eye (see cross-section, fig. 41). To create a surfeit of sensation everywhere was the building's intention.

Behind the stage was a glittering private room that recapitulated the public promenade of wealth and possession. This was the dance foyer (fig. 44), the place where dancers stretched, practiced, and chatted with lovers before, during, and after performances. According to Georges Montorgueil, a nineteenth-century journalist, this small, intimate room was frequented by **abonnés** (men who had seasonal tickets to the Opéra) "in black clothes and white ties ... almost as they frequent certain other places of easier access." (Montorgueil was referring to brothels.) Like the grand foyer, the dance foyer shimmered in gold and crystal and was decorated
with flamboyant, melodramatic paintings. The one sobering note in the room was the raw wooden floor, which, like the stage, sloped, in this case downward to a mirror. These characteristics announced that the dance foyer was also a workplace. Indeed, had the floor been polished and flat, rather than untreated and raked, the room might simply have been an arena for flirtation.

The Opéra was an emblem of culture and wealth or, to be more exact, newly accrued bourgeois wealth. It was hoped that it would also be an emblem of power. Much of the contemporary response to the building was, in fact, nationalistic. One critic exclaimed over what he felt to be the recognizable French physiognomies of Paul Baudry’s figures in the grand foyer (fig. 45). Another enthused that Baudry’s paintings were an “honor to our century and our country... [The decorations are] a victory for France... a French masterpiece like this amidst all the mediocrity of European art will bring as much honor to us as a victory on the battlefield.”

Small wonder such words were used, considering France’s ludicrous defeat in 1870, in six weeks, to Prussia. It had to be obvious at that point that the most industrialized country, in this instance Prussia, and not the most cultivated, France, as it considered itself, was the most powerful. Pride in the Opéra was just one of a number of efforts by which France tried to recoup its glory, part of its defensive attempt to picture itself at least as the modern Athens to Prussia’s Sparta.

This was a vain and hollow effort, however, when the focus was dance. The refinement of the audience can be measured by that of the frequenters of the dance foyer. It “was reserved exclusively,” writes a modern dance historian, “for the men who held the reins of fashion, and in particular for the members of the select Jockey Club, who occupied seven of the proscenium boxes... and who regarded the Opéra as a sort of fief.” By 1875, however, as we have seen, Jockey Club members were political anachronisms with little real power.

Everything related to the dance was for show, even the dancers. Their talent was less important than their looks, and everyone knew it. As one dancer put it: “What’s the use of doing yourself so much harm, when you can please just as well with much less effort? If you haven’t a good figure, you must use your talent, but if you are pretty and well formed, that makes up for everything.” Another woman who had left the ballet put it more crudely: “As soon as she [a dancer] enters the Opéra her destiny is as a whore is sealed; there she will be a high class whore.” The aura of the ballet dancer in

The 1870s and 1880s was very much like that of the movie star today. She was perceived as sexy, lively, a little dangerous and, above all, public. This image can be found in contemporary memoirs, newspaper illustrations like *The Sad Situation of Dancers at the Opera* and prints like *Riches and Love* (figs. 46, 47), picturesque literature, autobiography, and painting. In Léon Comerre’s *A Star*, for example, the dancer brazenly confronts the spectator, tutu fanning out about her, hands on hips, legs provocatively crossed (fig. 48). Another dancer—*La Zucchi* (1883, Bibliothèque, Opéra, Paris), painted by Georges Clairin, one of the decorators of the Opéra—poses with one hand on her hip and the other on the flats behind her, with a somewhat disheveled still life nearby. In *Backstage at the Opera*, Jean Béraud, Degas’ friend, painted the casual flirtatiousness of *abonnés* and dancers as
well as the easy proprietariness of the top-hatted, tail-coated men (fig. 49). Sex, pleasure, and power are all subjects in these paintings.

The public knew that the dance foyer was the milieu in which the dancers’ sentimental life unfolded. Public awareness of the room can be gauged by its appearance on the January 30, 1875, cover of Le Monde Illustré, just three weeks after Garnier’s building opened (fig. 50). The image was drawn by Edmond Morin, one of a number of artists who depicted contemporary life among the rich, known as la vie élégante. The subject is the casual flirtation of the foyer about which Degas’ friend Ludovic Halévy wrote in his notebook in 1863: “all around us coming and going were the twenty-five pretty girls of the corps de ballet . . . ‘This,’ M. Auber said to me, ‘is the only room that I love. Pretty heads, pretty shoulders, pretty legs, as much as one could wish for. More than one could wish for.”"
Garnier himself remarked that the foyer "receives ministers, ambassadors, abonnés and some journalists," and "is meant above all to serve the swarm of ballerinas coquettishly and picturesquely dressed." He recommended judging the room only when the dancers were in it, for, he said, "there is a real harmony between the walls of the foyer and the dancers." This was quite a revealing statement, for the walls are covered with paintings of voluptuous, bombastically gesturing women participating in allegorical dances of war, rural life, revelry, and love (fig. 51).

Although they in no way resemble Degas' paintings of ballet dancers, these decorations do invite comparison, in part because they were painted by Gustave Boulanger in 1874, the very year that Degas exhibited his images of dancers for the first time. The most striking difference between Degas' *Dancer Leaving Her Dressing Room* and Boulanger's *La Danse Bacchique*, (figs. 51, 52) for example, is probably the overtly sexual nature of Boulanger's "dancer" compared with the asexuality of Degas'. The inviting sexuality of the former is
created not merely by her partial nudity but by her throwing herself forward in space as if into the viewer's imagination. The sexual neutrality of Degas' dancer is assured not only by her dress but also by her awkward hesitation between her own space—her dressing room—and ours, the other side of the threshold. The aloofness, the sense of remove, of Degas' dancer is enhanced by the diagonal boundary of the foreground, which pushes her out of our imagined grasp. Boulangier's figure, on the other hand, is located parallel to our space. In addition, the theatricality of gesture in the Boulangier work is countered by the awkward self-containment of the Degas. Boulangier's dancer, and painting, invite and flirt with the spectator; Degas' does not seem to care.

What could Degas' awkwardly exiting Dancer Leaving Her Dressing Room or the studious atmosphere of his The Dancing Class (fig. 53) have to do with Boulangier's "dancers" or, for that matter, with the entire ballet world we have been considering? Degas was a habitué of Garnier's building. He climbed its stairs, chatted in its foyers, listened and watched from its auditorium and boxes. He also drank in its bars, wandered through its corridors, caught glimpses of it all in its mirrors. What, then, was the relationship between his paintings and the Opéra and the world of glitter and commerce it represented?

Let's consider Degas' The Star of 1875 with Comerre's A Star of 1882 (figs. 54, 48). Obviously, there is the difference in the setting: Degas' painting depicts an event on stage, Comerre's dancer is posed backstage. In addition, the latter's painting offers a familiar and comforting space in which the
dancer perches almost as if she were on a shelf. In Degas’ painting, in contrast, the spectator hovers dizzyingly above the scene, and the dancer is bizarrely splayed out below. Comerre’s ballerina is rooted foresquare in place as she brazenly challenges the spectator. Degas’ woman, precariously and fleetingly, eludes us. What, simply put, of the sexual allure in Comerre’s work in contrast to its apparent absence in Degas’? Display, bombast, and flirtation become in Degas’ image, discretion, understatement, and sexual neutrality.

The contrasts deepen if we consider other aspects of the Opéra’s world. In addition to sexual allure, exhibitionism, and acknowledged male propriety, two other less obvious but nonetheless important aspects of the dancers’ lives are frequently noted in contemporary references: their alleged low parentage and their reputed childhood poverty. Nestor Roqueplan, onetime director of the Opéra, claimed that the dancers were “almost always from the working class, and with rare exception, of unknown father.” The dancer Berthe Bernay presents her childhood in the early 1860s in these words:

My parents, who were not well off, lived at Belleville [a working-class district in the east end of Paris]... Nearly all my little companions... lived, like me... in the same sort of district. ... Winter and summer, my mother used to wake me up at half past seven in the morning to go to work. ... Needless to say, omnibus fares were beyond my small means, and I had to walk. ... I used to have lunch in the Rue Richer with my mother off the modest ration we had brought. ... Finally, when the performance had finished at midnight, I set out for home.

The last line of Degas’ own sonnet “Little Dancer” reads: “She remembers her race, her descent from the street.”

What we have, then, is an image of the dancer as an attractive, sexually available woman who has risen from poverty and questionable parentage. So far, a sense of her work is completely missing. Search as one will, the dance literature and contemporary memoirs do not provide information about the strain (or pleasure) of the dance for the performer. However, poor its quality in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, ballet still required hours and hours of tortuous practice. Thus, despite the paucity of written evidence, one believes the comte de Maugny, who wrote in 1889:

The life of a dancer was in fact far less wild than was commonly supposed. Classes, rehearsals and performances took up most of their days and evenings. Thus gallantry could only be a secondary pastime, and in most cases, necessarily took a reasonable form. ... The ballerina is fated to be the steadiest and most tranquil of the demi-mondaines.\(^{15}\)

The “myths” about ballerinas’ parentage and poverty are similarly questionable. The family backgrounds of the dancers working in France were roughly of two kinds. Some had fathers in the military, and others had at least one parent in the theater. For instance, Eugénie Schlosser was the daughter of a drummer in the national guard; Fanny Cerrito’s father was a second lieutenant in the army; and Amina Boschetti was a daughter of a general in the Austrian army. Carlotta Grisi came from a theatrical family; Fanny Eisler’s father was a musician and copyist for Haydn; Marie Taglioni came from a ballet family; Emma Livry’s mother was a dancer; and the father of Blanche and Suzanne Mante was a professional violin and bass player as well as a photographer.\(^{16}\)

Concerning the dancers’ finances, simple deductions from contemporary social data tell us that they could not possibly have been poor. Although it was commonplace for a child to be trained or apprenticed for a short period with no salary, no impoverished nineteenth-century French family could afford to have both a mother and a child who brought home no money. Since mothers usually attended their daugh-
ters during classes and rehearsals and backstage during performances, a case cannot be made for dancers having been poor. Furthermore, although the pay schedule for dancers was low through the mid-teens, it was substantial after the initial apprentice years.

From the age of seven to ten, a dancer earned two francs a day if she was in a performance (one franc in Paris in 1870 bought about one pound of meat; one and a half francs, a dozen eggs or a little less than a pound of butter). According to the dancer Bernay, in 1869 a performer in the second quadrille (at approximately age thirteen) could earn six hundred francs a year and, after passing an examination, seven to nine hundred a year. This was approximately what ironers and seamstresses earned. When the dancer entered the first quadrille (in her mid-teens), her income went to eleven hundred francs, and as leader of the corps de ballet she could earn twelve hundred. In the late 1870s and 1880s, when she was less than thirty years old, Bernay’s salary went from fifteen hundred up to sixty-eight hundred francs! Georges Duveau, the French labor historian, gives the following information on what working children earned during the Second Empire for between ten and fifteen hours work a day:

[Their salaries] oscillated between 50 centimes and 2 francs [a day, or between 121 and 486 francs a year]. In the coalfields of the North... children who went down into the tunnels earned from 50 to 80 centimes... In Sedan, in the textile industry, a child earned 75 centimes... In Limoges, in the porcelain works, he earned 60 centimes, in Creusot, in metallurgy, from 1.50 francs to 2 francs. In Paris, in the clothing house of Dusautoy, a child earned from 1 to 2 francs.

Because the children described here neither derived pleasure from their grueling work nor had any future to dream about, the young dancers’ lives were incomparably richer.

What these statistics indicate is that the public commen-

tary on dancers distorted crucial details and circumstances of their lives: the nature of their work, facts about their birth, and facts about their finances. Two prejudices, I believe, produced this commentary. The sexualization of their profession resulted from their being women on display; the emphasis on poverty and low parentage derived from the notion of the dancer as artist. At first this might seem contradictory, for an emphasis on her sexuality and frivolity would seem to preclude a view of the dancer as an artist. Yet the image of poverty and mysterious or low parentage, or even the illusion that the dancer did not really work, dovetailed with contemporary attitudes about artists—their charm and ease, but particularly their conquering of harsh material odds. The Impressionists, for example, have consistently been depicted in this light, whereas even the most superficial search produces evidence of their middle-class backgrounds and lifestyles.

Unfortunately, because of contemporary inability to see the reality of the dancers’ working lives, it is difficult to find information on them as workers. No labor or health reports exist for them, for example, whereas one has such documents for laundresses, milliners, embroiderers, prostitutes, and other working-class women. One is left with few material facts about the dancers’ lives and an abundance, by comparison, of picturesque fantasy. Nevertheless, from the sparse data we have, we can see that dancers were essentially lower middle class and earned more than a decent wage. They worked hard and may have been among the most independent women of their times. Yet, although most prints, paintings, and memoirs of the time ignore this information, Degas’ paintings of dancers do not. What is so interesting and important about his works is that they are deeply ambiguous; they both do and do not adhere to prevailing prejudices; they both support and subvert the commonly held stereotypes of the ballet dancer and her life.
also indicate the writers' tacit assumption of the titillating aspect of the subject.

Degas' letters bespeak his own familiarity with the sexual allure of the dancers. Writing to his friend the basoonist Désiré Dihau in 1872, he commented on the "roguish air" of one of the dancers and regretted "very much not being quite introduced." But the most telling indication that he shared his contemporaries' assumptions and stereotypes concerning the dancers' sexuality is a photograph that he made, probably before 1876. It is a studio work in which a dancer is posed in front of a drop cloth (fig. 55). Her legs have vanished, as has most of her face. The focus of attention is her upper torso. Her neck, shoulders, arms, and breasts are delicately and provocatively presented. And as her flimsy camisole slips from her shoulder, we glimpse what seems to be the aureole around her nipple. If she were simply naked, we would be looking at a studio nude; it is the contrast between dress and undress that makes the image titillating.

This conception of the dancer, one that acknowledges her sexual being, appears in Degas' paintings as well, but more covertly. The most obvious signs are the women's lovers. They are the tailcoated, top-hatted men in The Star, The Ballet Rehearsal, The Curtain (figs. 54, 56, 57), a fan

55. Degas. Dancer from the Corps de Ballet. Ca. 1876 or 1896.

Contemporary critics of Degas' work showed their awareness of the stereotypes. In 1877 a writer calling himself A.P. in Le Petit Parisien described Degas' ballerinas as "vice-ridden." Paul Mantz in 1881 found the sculpture Fourteen Year Old Dancer to be "almost frightening ... a flower of precocious depravity ... fathers are heard exclaiming: Heaven protect my daughter from this! ... [This is] a schoolgirl destined to become a woman whom diplomats will wildly entreat." Jules Claretie in the same year commented on "the seductive peculiarities" of the dance world which Degas painted. However negative these comments may seem, they

56. Degas. The Ballet Rehearsal. 1875.
entitled *Dancers* (ca. 1879 Durand-Ruel Collection, Paris), and, most obviously, the *Cardinal Family* monotypes (ca. 1880). But Degas presents the persona of the alluring dancer in ways that suggest not only her sexual availability but her relationship, conceptually, to the Opéra—a world of display and possession. It is the specific pictorial and narrative devices he uses in these works that evoke this relationship—the ways in which he “gives” or “shows” the women to us, the spectators.

Scholars have often used the word “voyeurism” to describe Degas’ vision. They have made little of this concept, however, interpreting it almost as a physical point of view rather like Monet’s location in Nadar’s studio when he painted *Boulevard des Capucines* (1873, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City). What needs to be considered instead are the conceptual implications of Degas’ voyeurism. For what he did consistently was to take intrinsically private moments and make them public. Traditionally, this has been dismissed as “civilized” lechery, peering through keyholes at naked women.

But what was Degas inviting his public to see? First of all, his paintings are rarely of performances. Rather, they depict scenes in classrooms, backstage, or on stage during rehearsal. And even when they are of performances, prominent parts of the paintings reveal views behind the flats that a spectator would not actually be able to see if he or she were in the audience. In *Curtain Call*, (fig. 58), for example, the far right part of the painting (in which the dancers are in position, if casually) shows what would be seen if one were sitting in the auditorium. To the left, however, a whole other scene takes place as if the dancers were on a revolving stage and readying themselves for the next act. We would not be able to see them if we were in the audience, for they are involved in a “backstage” or private moment. In *The Dancer in Green*
(fig. 59, also see color plates), the sharp diagonal motion and tangle of limbs rivet our attention, but almost immediately the green dancer's left hand (which humorously or aggressively blots out another dancer's face) leads our eyes into the background. There, a group of dancers seems to be relaxing nonchalantly. Again we are given both public and private backstage details. In Degas' paintings that are not of performances, the disclosure and detailed scrutiny of private moments are phemenal. One critic in 1877 put it succinctly: "For those who are partial to the mysteries of the theater, who would happily sneak behind the sets to enjoy a spectacle forbidden to outsiders, I recommend the watercolors of Mr. Degas. No one has so closely scrutinized that interior above whose door is written 'the public is not permitted here.'" In *The Dancing Class* (fig. 53), for example the girl at the center right practices a step; others to the right are stretching; two dancers to the left of the violinist thoughtfully watch the dancer practicing. Both groups represent an unselfconscious absorption, and are oblivious to any observer; indeed, both would be stunned to know they were being looked at. The woman to the left of the mirror is likewise privately absorbed, and those at the rear left are involved in a distinctly private exchange. Sim-
the back of the painting, two dancers and their mothers are straightening out costumes. Finally, to the far left, a woman indecorously scratches her back.

By disclosing these private moments and myriad others, Degas gave the spectator access to a world that was beyond his reach, the world accessible only to men of privilege—the abonnés or, in Degas' case, the well-connected artist. To see what others could not see was to have power. In other words, Degas' acts of disclosure in these paintings, the "look" that he gave to the spectator, permits the latter to share that power. Degas essentially was titillating his bourgeois audience by showing it a world to which its members did not have access but which they yearned to possess.

The relationship between seeing and power in Degas' ballet paintings can be extended by observing the small format and delicacy of what is perhaps his first complete ballet work, the Metropolitan Museum's The Dancing Class (fig. 53). Even if one had only a passing acquaintance with Degas' work, one would nonetheless be struck by the size and precision of this painting, which measures only 10\(\frac{5}{8}\) by 17\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Its detail, brushstrokes, and composition invite close scrutiny; it should be held in one's lap. In a word, the painting induces a private rapport with the viewer. The small size, the refined execution, and the nature of the subject matter suggest a relationship between this work and depictions of la vie élégante by artists such as Lami, Morin, Guys, and Gavarni.

These artists, who worked between the 1830s and the 1860s, depicted in watercolor and small format scenes of parks, cafés, the racetrack, the Opéra. Their patrons were aristocrats such as the duc d'Aumale (the proprietor of the magnificent estate at Chantilly where one of the most elegant racetracks in France was located), the comte du Murinais, and the Goncourt. In 1837, for example, Lami made a watercolor of the dance foyer (fig. 60). In it, tapering, wispy
although Daumier ruthlessly caricatured the middle classes, his depictions of the poor almost always assume their facial and bodily flaccidity and coarseness. In addition, if one looks at such middle-class weeklies as *Paris Illustré, Le Journal Amusant*, and *Le Monde Illustré*, the poor are presented as either ugly or, in the case of markedly moral young women, pure and innocent. Middle-class figures are always attractive, even if they behave foolishly. For example, one can watch the physical transformation of a lower-class woman worker in the pages of *Le Journal Amusant* from March 2, 1867 (figs. 69–75). In the beginning she is pure and pretty in a world of ugly and unsavory characters. As she climbs the social ladder (through prostitution), she becomes elegant and sophisticated. When she (inevitably?) topples back into poverty, she simultaneously becomes ugly.

Louis Chevalier, who has analyzed in depth the notion of ugliness as characteristic of the poor, has found that in ancien régime literature, descriptions exist of the poor as “flabby, pale, short, stunted.” Balzac describes Parisian workers as “a people of ghastly mien, gaunt, sallow, weather-beaten . . . exhumed people . . . [of] hellish complexion . . . [and with] contorted, twisted faces.” Although the image of workers changed after the June Revolution of 1848 and they became almost beautiful, and certainly robust and sturdy, for many middle-class observers ugliness lingered, perhaps was clung to, as an insignia of poverty.

Without associating poverty specifically with ugliness, one critic after another remarked upon the ugliness of Degas’ dancers. In 1880 Charles Ephrussi, art critic and owner of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, wrote: “[Degas] chooses a type of skinny dancer with uncertain shape, disagreeable and even repulsive features . . . the painter remains distinguished in his evocation of the figures’ ugliness.” Albert Wolff admired Degas’ drawing in an 1881 article in *Le Figaro*, but said that “the ballerinas . . . are still purposely shown as horrible and
ugly!” Paul Mantz commented on how, “tired, she [the ballet dancer] arches her back and stretches her arms behind her. Terrible, because she is without thoughts, her face—or rather her chin—points forward with an animal impertinence. . . . Why is she so ugly?” And Huysmans wrote in 1880: “Another one of his paintings is lugubrious. In an immense room in which exercise takes place, a woman rests, her jaw in her fists, an image of imbecility and fatigue.” Depicting dancers as ugly was double-edged, however. It allowed Degas’ audience to condescend to the women as lower class and maintained the myth of their poverty. But it also admitted, through the association of ugliness with poverty, that these were in fact working women and not merely decorative objects.

We have just seen the extent to which Degas’ images supported prevailing prejudices, thus making his work eminently salable. Yet there are equally numerous and perhaps more compelling ways in which these pictures subverted contemporary values. Again, we must examine Degas’ display of inherently private moments. The mundane details of a dancer’s workday could only have been recorded by a person who had privileged access to an exclusive world. But what happened when this privilege was “given” to the spectator? On one level the latter may well have reveled in this entrée and identified with its associated power. On another level, however, he participated in something completely different. For in these private moments he saw events that emphasized the dancer as a working person, absorbed in her own activity, in the midst of a community of other women like herself. Thus, a demystification of the dancer as an object of display and desire took place.

Degas’ works accomplish this demystification in a number of ways. One is through their extremely revealing social observations. His paintings tacitly assume, for example, that the women are actively involved in a communal effort, which sometimes requires group participation but more often simply provides an ambience of shared work. Although in the history of art there are innumerable instances of women together, what they are usually doing is attending to each others’ toilettes or taking care of children. Degas’ attention here to a work reality that generally went unnoticed in his society is remarkable. Another important aspect of the work environment that Degas noted is the presence of the dancers’ mothers. In Waiting (fig. 61) and the Mante Family (ca. 1887, Rogers Collection, New York), mothers share the tension and anxiety of waiting and preparation. In the Musée d’Orsay’s The Dancing Class, (fig. 9) the women watch, chat, or put finishing touches on makeup and costumes. In Mme.
Cardinal Backstage (monotype, ca. 1880), a mother monitors her daughter’s love life.

Although other observers of events at the Opéra remarked on the mothers backstage, their comments tended to be humorous, or even a little nasty. When Ludovic Halévy describes the mamans during examinations, he paints a comic frenzy:

Moving hither and thither about the stage, in a state of nervous agitation, are the coryphées and the members of the quadrilles, all in short white skirts, with large coloured sashes tied in small bows behind them. Then, all around, restless, bewildered, breathless and purple-faced, are mothers, mothers, and yet more mothers—more, I am sure, than there are dancers!\(^{36}\)

The comte de Maugny stresses the mothers’ roles as guardians of their daughters’ virtue:

Epic scenes took place there [backstage]. I have seen damsels departing triumphantly on an admirer’s arm after a good quarter of an hour’s parley with maman. I have seen some disappear surreptitiously behind their duenna’s back, leaving her prey to an epileptic agitation; and others carrying on brazenly beneath their very nose and receiving a volley of blows that would have frightened a street porter.\(^{37}\)

By comparison, Degas’ depictions are more serious and respectful. They exude an aura of matter-of-factness with regard to the mothers, who are simply caught up in the overall atmosphere of work.

Another striking way in which Degas’ compositions curb the appetite for display which is so dynamic a part of the ballet-dancer stereotype is through his use of mirrors. Whereas in Western art in general, mirrors reflect women looking at themselves, Degas’ almost never do. What one sees instead are reflections of dancers working. Frequently one also sees views of Paris in windows reflected in the mir-

rors (figs. 53, 65). Bringing the city into the room in this way also prosaicized the dancers and dramatically distinguished their real and ordinary routines from their much advertised sexuality.

In one particular instance, Degas’ close attention to details of work and mundane realities may have served to trick art historians in a rather amusing way. The steep diagonals of the floor planes in paintings like the Musée d’Orsay’s The Dancing Class, The Dancer in Green, and The Rehearsal (figs. 9, 59, 62) have traditionally been identified as a strictly formal device and associated with Degas’ interest in Japanese art. Although this interpretation is viable, it omits the fact that the floors of both the stage and dance foyer did incline, as we
have seen, and that Degas probably found just the right formal device—the dramatic diagonal—to fit an observation of physical reality, or at least the memory of that reality which lingered in the minds of dancers and observers.

One of the most persuasive ways in which Degas communicated an atmosphere of work in these paintings, however, is through his drawing technique, the way in which he defines forms in his paintings. Although many French nineteenth-century depictions of work exist, most artists edged real labor out of their paintings entirely by means of their drawing styles. In his Recall of the Gleaners (fig. 63), for example, Jules Breton crisply outlined the women who appear to glide gracefully through a field. Their harmonious and measured steps, their manicured clarity, their well-behaved, almost lyrical demeanor belie the drudgery of their work. Similarly, through the classical simplification of his drawing technique, François Bonvin depicted serene contemplation, not labor, in his Woman Ironing (1858, Philadelphia Museum of Art). Millet did the same in his Gleaners (1857, Louvre); his drawing is far more indebted to classical harmonies than to a knowledge of aching backs. Therefore, although the subject of peasants laboring was a provocative one for a bourgeois Parisian audience, idealization made these paintings palatable and purchasable. A discomforting subject was successfully neutralized.

In a painting such as Courbet's Women Sifting Corn (fig. 64), however, academic idealization has vanished. The figures are awkward; there is no sense of classical unity. Each person is absorbed in his or her own activity, be it sifting, musing, or scavenging. Drawing, figure types, and narrative disjunction have produced a painting in which traditionally maintained relationships or social spheres break apart and in which, in this case, labor enters the sanctum of art.

Degas' works, in a very different style, do the same thing. He loved to draw and did it brilliantly. One knows, one can observe, how much he admired Ingres. But we have
noted that he also admired and avidly collected Gavarni and Daumier. In a work like *The Ballet Class* (fig. 65, also see color plates), the imprints of both Ingres and caricature are evident. The former's linear precision and sharp edges can be seen in the seated foreground figure as well as the dancer in the left corner practicing an open arabesque. But the gestural shorthand and exaggeration of caricature are obvious in the enormous size of the dancer to the right, the relaxed, expressive slouch of the seated figure, and the concentrated gaze of the teacher. In such a work, classical unity vanishes as distinct and not necessarily sequential moments in time collapse into one. Other classical qualities such as harmony, repose, grace, and statuesque monumentality dwindle as the immediacy, awkwardness, and tension of the working moment come to the fore.

In one ballet painting after another, Degas decorously, even elegantly, expressed the indecorous through his drawing. In *Rehearsal* (fig. 62) a precise, fine Ingresque line locates the dancers in space and evinces their corporeality. But this convention is nearly sabotaged by the compressed violinist stuffed into the left corner, the fragments of limbs afloat at the right, and the caricature-like reduction of the dancers' facial features. Similarly, in a work like *The Star* (fig. 54), caricature-like elements are clear: one of the dancer's legs is missing; she "touches" some flats far behind her; she is fairly "assaulted" by the disembodied legs of dancers backstage. These reductions, compressions, jokes, could not be further from a tradition of classicism, yet the drawing of the dancer herself is exquisite and the obvious product of classical training.

One of the most vivid examples of the movement and tension of the work milieu in Degas' ballet paintings is his *The Dancer in Green* (fig. 59). The performers slide down a precipitous incline, arms and legs flying. The adjectives so
often used by contemporary critics of Degas to describe his work seem particularly relevant here: "nervous," "twisting," "awkward," "lugubrious." In his ballet paintings, Degas did what the poet Paul Claudel ascribed to Baudelaire: he "combined the style of Racine with the style of a journalist of the Second Empire," classicism and realism, together subverted the notion of the dancer as frivolous and charming.

Equally subversive is the commentary on male authority in these paintings. First of all, the teachers. Jules Perrot, the renowned former dancer and instructor shown in the Musée d’Orsay’s The Dancing Class (fig. 9), is an imperious figure, solidly rooted in place with the help of his stick. However, the complexity of the composition, especially the enormous size of the two dancers at the left and the intense oblique angle of the floor, turn him into a mere marker in the floor’s path. The teacher, probably Eugène Coralli, in The Ballet Class (fig. 65) is only the weaker half of a double-headed form of which the largest part is an oversized dancer. But perhaps the most humorous and charming of these depictions is the Rehearsal in the Dance Foyer (fig. 66). The teacher, a dark, Rorschach-like silhouette to the left, demonstrates a step. The dancers twirl across the canvas, leaning this way and that, one volatile silhouette joining up with another. The teacher’s authority is subsumed by this design; no hierarchy of power is asserted here. In Vincente Palmaroli’s The Dancing School (fig. 67) the teacher is represented quite differently. Foreground, middle ground, and background are clearly defined, and the erect, darkly clad teacher dominates the scene. He virtually looms up against the light background of delicately clad dancers. Not only does Degas’ painting question authority in the form of a male teacher but also rejects the norms of an artistic style based upon perspective and verisimilitude.

The abonnés dressed in formal black garb and top hats present in these paintings are enigmatic personages. In The
Ballet Rehearsal.

I Degas. At the Milliner's. (fig. 8).

COLOR PLATES
(Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate sequence of black and white illustrations)
Star (fig. 54), the male figure seems both there and not there. Tucked inconsequentially into the left corner, he is marginal but so vividly black and truncated that one cannot miss him. In The Ballet Rehearsal (fig. 56), the abonné is also marginal, pushed to the right edge of the painting, with what appears to be an unceremoniously appendaged extra limb. Even more awkward, wooden, and unglamorous are the men in The Curtain (fig. 57).

We must remember who the abonnés were in real life. Comte Fleury in the late 1860s portrayed one, the Prince de Galles, as being "as assiduous at the track . . . as in the dance foyer." Another, the duc Ludovic de Gramont-Caderousse, he termed an "arbiter of elegance . . . on the turf or in the wings." A dance historian has noted that "the President of the Jockey [Club], the Vicomte Paul Daru, irrefutable alike in manners in dress, would stride about the Foyer de la Danse like a Sultan in a seraglio." If the power of these men was dwindling, they were nonetheless commanding presences. Yet Degas' depictions of them do not demand respect. On the contrary, his paintings marginalize, truncate, and caricature them. Remarkably, none of his contemporaries commented on this.

What did people notice? As we have seen, they emphasized the dancers' ugliness and their immorality. In addition, writers discussed the works' "modernity." Edmond de Goncourt, for example, wrote that Degas had "fallen in love with modern life, and out of all the [possible] subjects . . . he has chosen washerwomen and ballet-dancers." Frédéric Chevalier noted that Degas' work possessed an "absolutely Parisian and modern sentiment." And Huysmans referred a number of times to Degas' "real concern for contemporary life."

Critics also found the works disturbingly realistic. One even called the paintings "frighteningly realistic"; another described their "disquieting sincerity"; someone else observed that they were "a startling but acutely exact impres-
sion.” According to Huysmans, Degas “implacably rendered the awkwardness of the dancer, deformed by the mechanical monotony of her professional leaps. . . . His realism is of the kind . . . which certain Primitives imagined.” It is a “terrible reality,” he claimed.\(^4\)

Why was it so “terrible”? And can we construct an interrelationship among “ugliness,” “immorality,” “modernity,” and “terrible reality”? Georges Rivière wrote: “Realism is sad. It accentuates . . . the ugliness that it finds everywhere as being the incontestable expression of truth.” And Charles Baudelaire, referring to Daumier’s Rue Transnonain (1834), explained: “It is not what you would call caricature exactly, it is history, it is reality, trivial and terrible.”\(^5\) It would seem that for those who felt threatened by the modern world of innovation and shifting social values, the term modern was confounded with ugliness and immorality. Furthermore, many felt that their lives were invaded by the people who in their minds carried the contagion of modernity—workers. Middle-class Parisians increasingly felt outnumbered by them and threatened by imminent conflict with them, especially since revolution had been a fact of life all century long. One newspaper asserted in 1874 that Paris was a “formidable workers’ city [and] the permanent home of insurrection and civil war.” Hobsbawm is certainly correct when he points out that “[if the Commune] did not threaten the bourgeois order seriously, it frightened the wits out of it by its mere existence.”\(^6\)

Huysmans’ “terrible reality,” I believe, was this reality: France irreversibly dominated by capitalism—by movement, change, insecurity and, it was feared, the working classes, with their immorality, their vulgarity, their ugliness, and their power. Degas’ reality was so “terrible” because it was ugly and unstable. It was additionally disconcerting because it dignified what the middle classes wanted to consign to the moral rubbish heap, namely working women and espe-

\(^4\) Degas’ paintings of the latter, objects of sexual gratification and purchasable pleasure became working people. Furthermore, powerful men were marginalized, and in a larger sense, it was more than men’s position at the Opéra that was questioned. As paradigms of power and authority, they were emblems of a vanishing order. Therefore, when a critic today writes that it was the “time-honored aspect of the ballet [which] undoubtedly . . . appealed to the mature Degas, a man of strongly conservative character who cherished old customs and attitudes,” I must disagree. For Degas’ ballet paintings, far from being about what was “time-honored,” captured the disintegration of that very world and the anxiety it produced. We cannot find a ballet painting—look at The Dancing Class, The Ballet Class, The Rehearsal, The Star, The Dancer in Green—whose focus is not dispersed, whose viewpoint is not dizzying, whose figures do not slide uncontrollably about, whose figurative definitions do not verge on caricature. This is modernity and change and not maintenance of a status quo. Which is not to say that Degas would have put it this way. Not at all. He probably would have stressed the appeal of tradition and good taste. His racing paintings had indeed reiterated the “time-honored” aspects of the milieu they pictured; social tension rarely surfaced in them. The classicizing drawing, the planar divisions of space, as well as the emblematic anonymity of the riders insured a tone of convention and conservatism. Not so the ballet paintings. The old world of the dance and Opéra were gone, like so much else, and that is what I believe Degas’ ballet paintings are about.