

# I THE WORLD OF THE LITTLE DANCER

## ME SOLITARY BALLERINA

It has been the unfortunate fate of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* to be singled out for its uniqueness- as the only sculpture exhibited by Degas in his lifetime, as the largest work he ever attempted in three dimensions, and as a curious, even freakish, portrait of a young ballerina in wax, hair, and fabric. In a way that is profoundly misleading, this perception has set the *Little Dancer* apart from Degas' other works of art and from most aspects of the historical context that gave it thrill and meaning. Though the sculpture has been endlessly cited and admired, little attention has been paid to the gradual evolution of the figure of the young ballet dancer in Degas' earlier paintings and pastels, or to the stubborn survival of the sculpture's form in his subsequent imagery. In a similar way, few attempts have been made to understand the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* against the background of training and rehearsal in late nineteenth-century ballet, a subject on which Degas himself was conspicuously well informed. Divorced from these circumstances, Degas' wax statuette has also remained strangely detached from the sculptural history of the period, as if it had been made in a creative vacuum and without reference to the technical concerns of other practitioners, a number of whom - it now transpires - the artist knew at first hand. Too often seen in isolation, the *Little Dancer* has been over-simplified and reduced to a near cipher, despite the widely varying responses of its first audiences, the profound ambiguity of its physical appearance, and continuing uncertainty about many of its original features.

The more closely we examine the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* and the visual culture to which it belonged, the more evident are its roots in current practice and in the complex development of Degas' career. During the 1870s, Degas had emerged from professional obscurity to enjoy critical acclaim as the leader of a major faction of the Impressionist group, progressively abandoning the restraint of his formative years in favor of a kind of technical and thematic bravado. Already in his late forties when he began the sculpture, Degas was simultaneously involved in a redefinition of his realist project, pushing his skills and material resources to their limit and subverting many of the conventions that had formerly sustained his art. Now known to his peers as "the painter of dancers," Degas increasingly used the subject of the ballet to break new compositional ground or cross pictorial frontiers, such as those between pastel and printmaking or between the depiction of public spectacle and private behavior. As we move toward the end of the decade, the figure of the solitary dancer becomes the focus of much of his attention, demanding new strategies of material and psychological expression and finding its ultimate form in a one-meter-high, partly colored sculpture of a young ballet pupil. Without proposing the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* as a self-

Richard Kennell  
The Little Dancer

portrait of the artist in any but the most metaphorical sense, it is still possible to see this defiant, contained work of art as an emblem of Degas' maturity as he, too, faced a variously hostile and appreciative audience.

Few studies of the theme have taken into account the very beginnings of Degas' engagement with the dance. In the 1850s and 1860s, during his apprentice years, the artist made more than a dozen varied and separate renderings of the subject, based on classical sculptures and paintings by other artists as well as first-hand encounters with stage performances and groups of decorous or bucolic waltzers.' Though little more than sketches, these works announce Degas' awareness of a socially diverse tradition and perhaps his first assessment of their contemporary potential. This potential was not to be tested until about 1867, when he embarked on *Mlle Fiocre in the Ballet "La Source,"* a large and richly worked canvas showing a leading ballerina of the day posed on stage between two ornately dressed attendants and a real horse, the latter inclining its head to drink at a theatrical stream. - Exhibited at the Salon of 1868, when the novelist and critic Emile Zola rather surprisingly compared its palette of silvers and russets to that of a Japanese print, this picture prefigured Degas' activities at the time of the making of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in a number of curious ways.' Initially planned in a series of drawings, the posture of Eugenie Fiocre was also studied in the nude - presumably from a hired model - just as the *Little Dancer* was to find its earliest form in drawn and modeled studies of the naked figure. Eugenie Fiocre is shown in a setting at the Paris Opera (where the dancer who posed for the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was later to perform), where Fiocre, too, attracted the attentions of a number of painters and sculptors. Most famously, Fiocre was immortalized in a life-size bust by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux that was cast in several materials and reduced-scale replicas; it is less well known that Degas himself expressed his appreciation of one of these models at the end of his life.' In a final coincidence, Degas' picture of the dancer has often been linked with his own first experiment in sculpture, a modest figurine of a drinking horse that corresponds in most respects to its painted counterpart.'

Within a short space of time, Degas followed these faltering experiments with a sequence of more accomplished equestrian models and a group of small, radical canvases of dance scenes, showing not just events on stage but fractured glimpses of the audience, the orchestra pit, and the theater itself. A work like the *Musee d'Orsay's Orchestra of the Opera* of around 1870, with its looming musicians and distant view of the truncated corps de ballet, attracted both praise and patronage for the aspiring artist, initiating a life-long public association with the ballet and the appropriation of a distinctive spatial and technical vocabulary." Soon the critics were on his trail; "The dance foyer is his predilection," announced Ernest Chesneau in 1874, while Etienne Carjat claimed that such scenes were "finely observed and ingeniously rendered," and Ernest d'Hervilly suggested that Degas' ballet pictures "would soon fascinate Paris." Philippe Burry was more expansive: "There is as yet no-one," he wrote, "who has made such portraits of the dancer, the coryphee, made of gauze and bone, with emaciated arms, tired waist, balanced body, legs with that distinctively professional beauty whose multiple facets make up the general beauty of society.'" Written at the time of the first Impressionist exhibition, when four of Degas' ten listed submissions were depictions of the ballet in different media and on varying scales, these observations were among the first to define the artist's professional identity. At subsequent group shows, which were held almost annually at this period, both the overall total of Degas' works and the proportion of dance subjects continued to increase, along with the

fulsomeness of his admirers' prose; at the 1876 exhibition, the painting *Dance Rehearsal* (cat. z) was saluted by Emile Zola for its "highly original character" and for the artist's "profound love of modernity, of everyday interiors and human types," while, confronted by the superb *Dance Examination* (cat. 15) in the 1880 installation, Charles Flor proposed that "Monsieur Degas deserves to be placed among the finest of today's draftsmen."

From the beginning, Degas' pictures of the dance were characterized by their visual and practical daring, even a kind of brash sensationalism that reflected the sometimes lurid world the ballerinas inhabited. Delighting in the contrast between the nmsty gloom of the auditorium and the spectacle beyond, Degas took unprecedented liberties with the representation of the dancers themselves, plunging them into shadow or disfiguring them in the footlights, foreshortening their bodies, and showing them haphazardly from the front, the side - and most audaciously of all - with their backs to the crowd." Rapidly extending his resources, he turned to pastel, *essence* (dilute oil paint on paper), pen-and-ink, gouache, and metallic pigment, and to a range of printing processes, such as etching, lithography, and monotype, as well as to bizarre combinations of these techniques that baffled his staunchest admirers." Given his restlessness and near-arrogant versatility, it might be said that the only surprising feature of Degas' move into sculpture was that it took so long. Making its first, nmch-heralded appearance at the 1881 Impressionist exhibition, the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was the latest in a series of bravura performances, here pitting the largely self-taught modeler against a two-thirds life-size statuette and all the demands of construction, elaboration, and the *integration* of artificial and "real" materials it entailed. Seizing vet more professional terrain, Degas asserted his originality and his dominance of an aggressively modern theme - as well as his prominence in the Impressionist enterprise - at a single stroke.

If a broad evolution can be discerned in the mass of ballet compositions from Degas' early years, it is from the image of the group to that of the individual, from the sweeping panorama of stage or rehearsal room to the predicament of the single performer. In this sense, the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was the exemplification of a decade of study, of an art "made of renunciations" (as he was later to call it) that can be followed across the years. - With an artist as willful and unprogrammatically as Degas, there are always exceptions to any pattern of development; in this case, we can hardly overlook the fact that *Mile Fiocre in the Ballet "La Source,"* his first dance picture, shows a single named ballerina at relatively close quarters and that certain later canvases include arrays of anonymous dancers. But the larger trend remains, as well as the sense of the *Little Dancer's* slow emergence from the shadows - which prepared the way for, but hardly reduced the impact of, the figure's spotlight entry into the creative arena. At least seven years before the unveiling of Degas' sculpture at the sixth Impressionist exhibition, similarly posed young dancers can be found in assorted groups of drawn or painted performers, their backs erect, their arms behind them, and a single leg thrust forward. As time goes past, some of these figures detach themselves from their peers and acquire a striking separateness, achieving distinction through their deportment, their costumes, and their personal accessories. Gaining also in substance as Degas refined his mastery of light and shade, this intensely realized cast of dancers seems poised between the pictorial and the sculptural domain.

Two oil paintings shown at the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874, both of them contributing in well-documented ways to the establishment of Degas' reputation as a specialist in the dance, illustrate this progression. In *Dance Class*

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(fig. 1), executed in 1871, the artist arranged ten members of the corps de ballet across a tiny panel, their numbers wittily augmented by mirror reflections and a solitary, violin-playing male. Though one dancer takes a tentative step from the throng, our attention is scattered across the indolent gathering in the left foreground and their exercising companions at the distant barre, as we marvel at the compression of incident in so small a composition and perhaps agree with a contemporary English critic that "its breadth and softness of effect are first-rate."<sup>14</sup> Such breadth, however, precludes a lingering focus on any single performer, and in this work - and such associated canvases as the Musee d'Orsay's *Dance Class at the Opera* - each ballerina remains contained and essentially self-effacing. Even where drawings for such figures survive, as in the refined *Ballet Dancer Adjusting Her Costume* (cat. 3), it is the Posture - a generic feature common to her profession - rather than the personal distinctiveness of the model that occupies the artist. Shortly before the 1874 exhibition, Degas embarked on no less than three versions of a larger ballet subject, from which he chose the ghostly, monochrome *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* (fig. a) to hang in his final display.<sup>14</sup> Again, the emphasis is on the ensemble, here further unified by the silvery theatrical light and the dancers' shared, almost numb involvement in their routines. Exemplary as a study in pose and observation (Chesneau noted of the picture that the artist "draws all the contortions of leg and dislocations of hips and feet in a way that is precise, exact, with no purpose other than that of scrupulous fidelity"), *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* might be a modern frieze or a superior pattern-book of theatrical behavior."

Despite its early date, *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* is also the occasion of our first meeting with an unmistakable precursor of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Prepared in a careful chalk drawing and recurring in the two other variants of the scene, the standing dancer at the extreme left-hand edge - her hands clasped behind her back, her right leg extended - directly anticipates the pose of Degas' wax sculpture. Minor differences can be identified; here, the face tilts downward

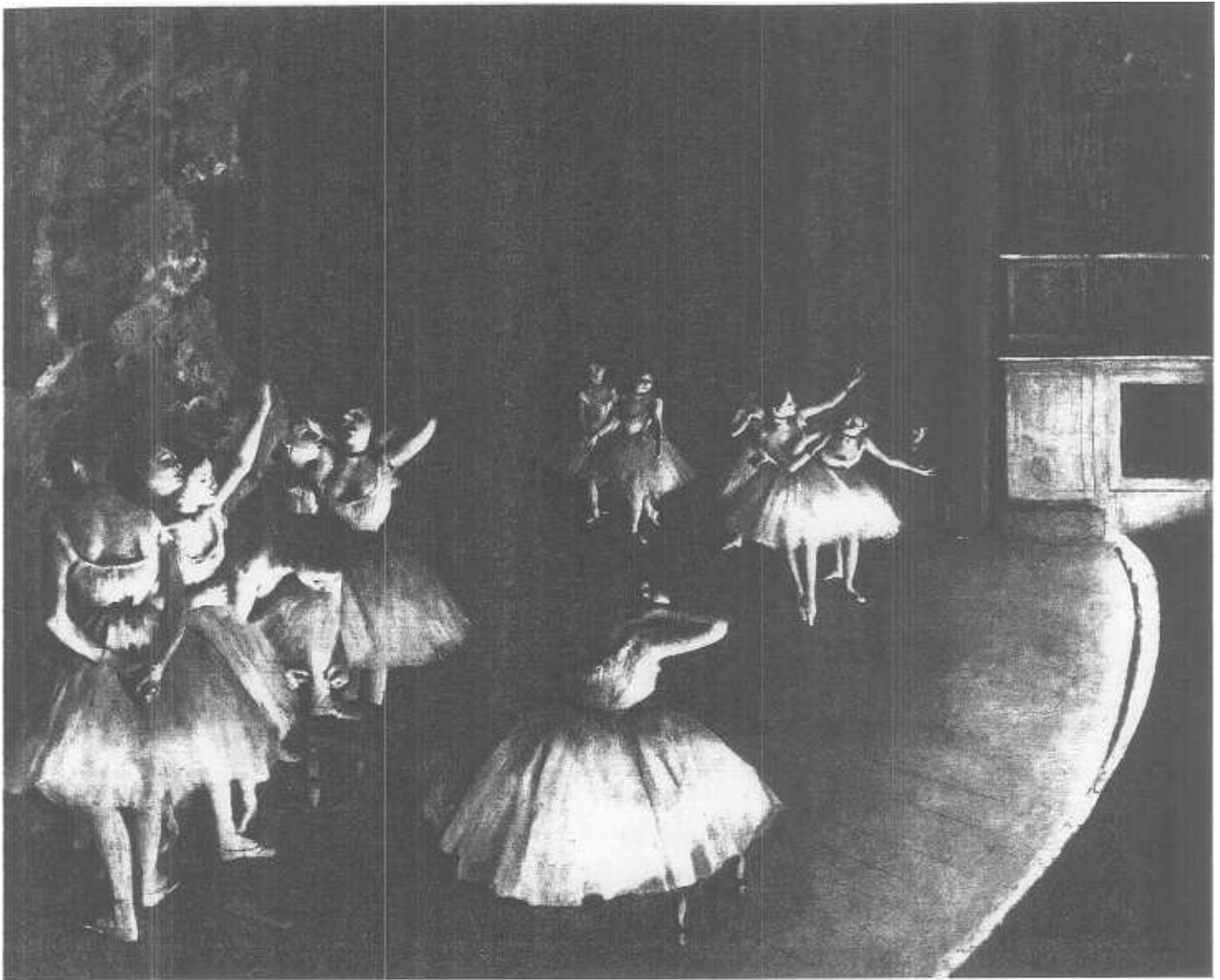


Fig. 2 *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage*, 1874, oil on canvas, as the original artist. (68 x 51 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

and the hair is gathered into a bun, for example, while the left hand grasps the right wrist, instead of interlacing with the fingers in the manner of the 1881 statuette. But the reposeful, matter-of-fact posture is essentially that of its three-dimensional successor, along with the air of detachment that seems to insulate the dancer from the exertions and extravagant boredom of her colleagues. As we shall discover, this pose was not chosen front the canon of standard ballet steps or exercise positions, but was a variation preferred by Degas himself, perhaps noticed in an informal gathering of "rats"-as the young dancers were colloquially known - or refined in the privacy of his studio. Even at this date, however, it is apparent that the near-symmetrical qualities of the posture answered a deep need in Degas' compositional project, allowing him to contrast a static figure with a more animated one, or to introduce a vertical note among the "contortions of legs and dislocations of hips and feet" evoked by Chesneau.

In at least a dozen finished pastels, prints, and oil paintings of this period, and many more drawings, Degas returned to variants of the monochrome dancer,

until she seemed to haunt the repertoire of his middle years. Sometimes the figure is difficult to discern, as in the cropped rear view of a standing ballerina at the left of *Dance Rehearsal* (cat. 2), which is based on a study very close to that of her precursor in *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage*.<sup>100</sup> In other works, her stance is distinguished from the Little *Dancer* by a raised arm or a redirected glance; in both *Two Dancers* (cat. 3S) and the closely related drawing from the artist's sketchbook (cat. 34a), for example, the body position is almost indistinguishable from that of the sculpture, even though the head has been turned to one side and alternative positions for the hands explored. In another subgroup, the amts come close to their distinctive arrangement in the wax figure; the brilliantly economical sketch *Dancer on Stage* (cat. 16) shows the model pushing her tutu behind her, in contrast to the rapidly brushed figure with hands on hips in the corner of *Sketches of Dancers* (cat. 1), who seems more stubbornly resigned than poised. A close cousin of this dancer recurs in another cluster of variants, now bending forward at the waist and apparently tying her sash in the small of her back. Lightly drafted in the aquatint *Two Dancers in a Rehearsal Room* (cat. 9), this character is inspected from the reverse angle in *Dancer Tying Her Scarf* (cat. 10) (where she has acquired a shawl) and from a slightly higher vantage point in *Dancer Standing* (cat. 47). The same statuesque form reappears in increasingly refined pastels and an entire series of friezelike canvases that occupied Degas into the 1880s and beyond.<sup>101</sup> By now spawning offshoots of its own in every medium at the artist's disposal, including further wax sculptures, this resonant image effectively earned the echo of the Little Dancer Aged *Fourteen* into the artist's last years.

As Lillian Browse noted in her pioneering volume *Degas Dancers* of 1949, another figure was similarly picked out for close attention from *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage*, as if the artist were adopting a cinematic "close-up" or allowing a detail to fill his pictorial screen.<sup>102</sup> This time it was the ballerina<sup>103</sup> on the right of the composition, who (with her curtseying companion) came to dominate the canvas *Two Dancers on the Stage*, now in the Courtauld Collection.<sup>104</sup> If this decision gave notice of the shift from complexity to singularity in Degas' ballet scenes, it also offered an insight into the artist's motivations. In the Courtauld picture, the dancer is daringly encircled by near-emptiness, our curiosity fixed on the minutiae of her dress, silk slippers, neck ribbon, and floral headdress, as well as her dark hair and "snub-nosed and slightly simian" features, as John House has called them.<sup>105</sup> This is not, in other words, just another trouper from the corps de ballet, but a particular young woman with idiosyncrasies of presentation and physique, each of which necessarily contrasts with that of her more recessive attendant. As we follow Degas' work into the mid and late 1870s, such sharp characterization becomes the rule rather than the exception, often accompanied by evidence of the artist's firsthand contact with his human subjects and their theatrical world. Documented dancers, from the young and undistinguished Melina Darde, Nelly Franklin, and the Mante sisters to the more illustrious Alice Blot, Josephine Chabot, and Rita Sangalli, appear with increasing frequency in portraits or as models for drawings, their names inscribed on the picture or recorded in titles.<sup>106</sup> From Degas' pastels, notebooks, and other sources we learn of his presence at a dance examination around 1880, his contacts with some of the leading choreographers, instructors, musicians and composers of the Paris Opera, and visits to specific operas and ballets, among them Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Massenet's *Le Rot de Lahore*, and Metra's *Yedda, Legende Japonaise*.<sup>107</sup>

The more familiar Degas became with the public face of the dance, the more

inclined he was to seek out its hidden life, in penumbrous studies of the theater wings, images of backstage inertia and glimpses of dingy, conspiratorial corridors. Though ballet performances can still be seen in a limited number of works, such as the glorious flame and gold *Dancers (fan design)* from Baltimore (cat. 26) and in prints like *On Stage III* (cat. 21), *Three Ballet Dancers* (cat. 22), and *At the Theater: Woman with a Fan* (cat. a8), it was the unglamorous routines of the ballerinas' training that became the staple of his stature art. At the Opera, access to this behind-the-scenes world was strictly regulated, confined to the wealthy or well-connected *abonnes*, or male subscribers, and to the personnel of the institution and their escorted visitors. From Henri Lovrette's studies of the records at the Paris Opera (where both ballets and operas were performed), it appears that Degas had very limited opportunity to observe the more formal aspects of this milieu at first hand until some years after the period in question, when his pictorial vocabulary was well established. An important distinction must be made, however, between the self-conscious posturing of the Opera *foyer de la danse*, where dancers displayed themselves to the *abonnes* before and during performances, and the day-to-day activities of the rehearsal rooms, which the artist almost certainly frequented in the company of acquaintances - such as Halevy, Mante, Dihau, and many others - who were connected to the Opera. Degas' success in arranging his attendance at a dance examination between 1878 and 1882 is attested in two letters and a little-cited note, which make it clear that it was the young dancers of the Opera who were under scrutiny on this occasion.<sup>21</sup> Working from such experiences and from reconstructions of figure groups in his studio, and from a collection of props - such as tutus, ballet shoes, fans, benches, and even a spiral staircase and conductor's rostrum he is known to have accumulated for this purpose - Degas contrived to combine plausibility with an exceptional degree of artistic freedom.';

In technical terms, a practice session or rehearsal scene had many advantages for a doggedly studio-based artist like Degas, allowing him to minimize the rapid movement and aerial gymnastics of a stage production and to position his dancers at will. A picture like *Dance Rehearsal* (cat. 2), the work that attracted Zola's admiration at the 1876 exhibition, was clearly contrived around a loosely re-invented exercise room at the old Opera building, within which the artist has positioned a miscellany of individuals who stand, stretch, and gossip. Drawing each of these figures separately- or perhaps in twos and threes- in the controlled conditions of his studio, Degas then transferred his studies to the final canvas, either free-hand or by means of tracing paper or the "squaring-up" process still visible in many of his studies.' A selection of contemporary anecdotes allow us an insight into Degas' reliance on off-duty ballerinas for this complex, collagelike process. In 1872, the painter Evariste de Valernes noted on one of his own dance studies that it was made after "a dancer from the Opera" in the "rue Laval studio of my friend Degas," an occasion that also produced - as Richard Thomson has shown - the russet-red canvas *Ballet Dancer with Arias Crossed* (cat. 4) by Degas himself-' Georges Jeannot, another artist-acquaintance who first met Degas in 1881, recalled a number of similar events, including his introduction to a dancer-model from the Opera who was encouraged to show her "graceful, childish back" to the visiting friend, and a drawing session with Rosita Mann and Marie Sanlaville, both leading ballerinas of the day, who were accompanied by a group of younger dancers: "The movements were posed by the pupils of the corps de ballet," he explains, "the heads by the two stars."<sup>27</sup>

Many of the ballet compositions completed by Degas in the years around the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* bear the hallmarks of these studio encounters. In both

Dancer in Green (cat. 24) and Dancer with a Fan (cat. 27), we effectively share an empty, workaday space with a solitary young woman, her limbs held in positions she could sustain for long periods of time and her demeanor consistent with disciplined repose. As scenes of the ballet or of backstage existence they are hardly informative, but as records of a working relationship between the artist and a particular model they are rich in observation, physical nuance, and human immediacy. So tangible are they that such figures already seem to invite a sculptural response, a possibility made more explicit in a group of studies on paper from the late 1870s, each of which shows more than one view of a single individual. In few of the works of this period does the Little Dancer seem more imminent, whether in a selective analysis of limbs and features, such as Study for Dancers at the Bar (cat. 13) or in more ambitious spatial explorations. Dancers (cat. 33) not only reveals the artist rotating from one side of the woman's torso to another, but effectively records the haste of Degas' graphic procedures and an implicit sequence of movement from left to right. Study of Three Dancers (cat. 32) might be a preparatory gambit for the Little Dancer itself, the model leaning to one side and then the other, before raising her head and arriving at a state of stability that depends on her projected foot; still undecided about the position of her arms, Degas seems to toy with yet another variation in poise and energy as he readies himself for the final form of his statuette.

When Degas composed Three Ballet Dancers (fig. 3), he again drew the same model three times across the top of the sheet, varying her pose from the Little Dancer like figure at the right to the more relaxed, open postures at left and center.<sup>21</sup> The result is a kind of progression, an unfinished circular tour of a largely fixed form that seems to question the constraints of picture-making. Few concessions have been made to the realities of the dance or the plausibility of the setting, the latter "filled in" almost casually to offset the implausible triplets, while a bleached and empty foreground balances their nervous physicality. In the Clark collection's Dancin' Lesson (cat. 29), a work with an exceptional affinity with the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen, a comparable dialogue between mass and emptiness prevails. Here more subtly integrated into the compositional scheme, three loosely related subgroups of dancers display gentle variations on a set of postures, hinting at arrested movement and the passage of time. Returning to an image he had drawn from several angles on previous occasions, most recently in Dancer with a Fan (cat. 30), Degas gave particular prominence to the proud, erect figure at the center, whose slender physique and taut features have much in common with the model for the wax statuette. In the painting, Degas crisply outlines her limbs and illuminates her form with a convenient shaft of light from the window, so that she, too, seems about to step beyond the confines of her planar world.

Significantly, several of the critics who saw the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen in 1881 perceived it as a continuation of Degas' already familiar pictorial repertoire: Paul de Chary, for example, announced that "this time M. Degas, the painter of dancers, takes on the title of their sculptor," and Charles Ephrussi understood the work to be a natural extension of the artist's existing project, "a new endeavour, an attempt at realism in sculpture." While these contemporaries would have had little or no access to Degas' notebooks, portfolios of drawings and prints, and unexhibited pastels and canvases, today we can see even more closely how accurate their assessment was. With hindsight, we can also trace the persistence of the Little Dancer's form into the following decades, and beyond into Degas' paintings and sculptures of the early twentieth century. In such a process, it is impossible to exaggerate the continuing importance of the wax statuette itself,

Fig. 3 *Fourteen Ballet Dancers*, ca. 1880-85, pastel, 31 x 51.5 cm. private collection, Courtesy of the artist's estate, Lot 100.



which remained in the artist's possession and on conspicuous, if private, display for the rest of his career. Unsold and without any known prospective buyers at the 1885 exhibition, the *Fourteen Ballet Dancers* was its fixed presence in Degas' life, literally prominent in his studio or apartment and symbolically central to his earlier public achievement. Numerous visitors recorded their sightings of "the



Fig. 4 Suzanne Valadon, *Puberty*, pastel and charcoal, 24 x 13 1/2 in (61.3 x 34.2 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Carter H. Harrison.

remains of his celebrated statue of *La Danseuse*," as the American collector Louisine Havemeyer described it, and there is some evidence that the figure acquired a cult status in Degas' circle." Painter and sculptor acquaintances of these years - from Paul-Albert Bartholome, Georges Jeannot, and Walter Sickert to Maurice Denis and Georges Renault - inevitably became conversant with the work, and when Suzanne Valadon made regular calls to discuss her drawings with Degas at the turn of the century, it apparently left its mark. Impressed as she was by both Degas' technique and subject matter, it is hardly fanciful to see a reflection of - or even an act of homage to - the *Little Dancer* in her forceful pastel and charcoal study *Puberty* of 1908 (fig. 4).<sup>1</sup>

Living and working in the shadow of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* for more than three decades, Degas was repeatedly stimulated to rework its distinctive forms or respond to its sculptural potential in the idiom of the moment. Some of the waxes that followed it, such as *Dancer Ready to Dance, Right Leg Forward* (cat. 50), *Grand Arabesque, First Time* (cat. 51) and *Dancer Loving Forward* (cat. 53), take up the position of legs and body while progressively animating the model's arms and head, as the ballerina seems to gather energy for a leap from her terrestrial roots. Now appearing naked and without pretensions to topicality, these dancers also reveal a maturity of physique that distances them from the coy suggestiveness that had once been identified in their adolescent precursor. If certain drawings of this period, like the touchingly earnest *Dancer at Rest* (cat. 60), remind us of Degas' continuing attention to the niceties of the practice room, others reiterate his gathering confidence in three-dimensional structure and bodily movement. Seen together, *Dancer Adjusting Her Dress* (cat. 46) and *Dancers* (cat. 49) offer a persuasive account of a single standing figure, massively blocked in with light and shade and inventively various in the positioning of the arms in a way that recalls his first sculptural studies. But it is in a group of three related waxes from the last decades of Degas' life that the most deliberate echoes of the *Little Dancer* can be felt. In the two versions of *Dancer at Rest, Hands Behind Her Back, Right Leg Forward* (cats. 58 and 59), we confront a muscular, almost agonized variant of the solitary ballerina, now with an energetic striding posture and elbows braced to support her spine. If we resist the notion that these figures - made as much as two decades after the 1881 *coax* - reflect Degas' own increasing sense of mortality and physical decline, it is less easy to accommodate their strangely poignant successor, *Dressed Dancer at Rest, Hands Behind Her Back, Right Leg Forward* (cat. 61). Unquestionably a revisitation of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* from the artist's later years, this work seems to unite the dense expressiveness of the final decades with a memory of his earlier literalism, its massiveness in near-tragic contrast with the lean, tensile form of his 1881 masterpiece.

#### THE LIFE OF THE "LZAT"

"I could tell you things to make you blush or make you weep ...

The belief that Degas' art offers an exact, documentary account of the ballet in nineteenth-century Paris is one of the most stubborn misconceptions surrounding his achievement. In actuality, his dance pastels and paintings - and in subtly different ways, his sculptures - are pitched somewhere between fact and fiction, between his acquired expertise in the performers' world on the one hand and a curious blend of obsession, inventiveness, and shameless nostalgia on the other.

Historians of the ballet have stressed the accuracy of certain aspects of Degas' testimony: Lillian Browse, herself a trained dancer who once interviewed some of the artist's surviving models, writes of his "absolute faithfulness" to the "laws and conventions" of the classical ballet; the author of a dozen volumes on the nineteenth-century dance, Ivor Guest, salutes Degas' "miraculous precision" and "unsurpassed penetration into the mysteries of the ballet"; and Martine Kahane, an authority on the history of the Opera, singles Degas out for his precise portrayal of the dancers' predicament and their "bodies formed by work, their features carved by exhaustion."<sup>52</sup> Our brief survey of Degas' dance imagery in the 1870s offers much to support these views, in evidence of visits to known performances at the Opera, in personal and professional contact with a number of dancers, and in his documented study of their poses, costumes, and routines. Consistent with his first-hand scrutiny of laundresses, cabaret artistes, prostitutes, and hat-shop assistants during this same period, his representations of the ballet appear to emerge from the same broadly based project of realism - with its search for "the special characteristics of the modern individual," as the critic Edmond Duranty expressed it - at a defining stage of Degas' early maturity as

Yet the same pictorial and archival evidence can be made to tell a different story, one that runs parallel to Degas' known engagement with realism but, in certain ways, brings us nearer to the complexity of that engagement and to the "systematic preoccupation with strangeness" that Duranty had also discerned in him." For all its documentary precision and atmospheric plausibility, a painting like *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* (fig. 2) is revealed on closer inspection to be a kind of jigsaw, a confection of postures, properties, and light effects that was almost certainly never seen in this form by Degas or any of his contemporaries. When we discover that most of its poses were repeated in other works, and that a number of its characters were entirely repainted as the picture progressed, the contrivance of Degas' method - in its way, as false and arbitrary as the theatrical spectacle itself - is definitively unmasked." The more pedantic we become, the more the "artifice" (as Degas himself referred to it) of his art is paraded before us. It has often been pointed out, for example, that the costumes and ornaments worn by Degas' dancers in rehearsal are largely fanciful: in daily practice, the plainest of tutus, bodices, and stockings were insisted upon, sometimes augmented by shawls or street clothes to offset the cold for those in attendance. Witnesses of these events are emphatic on the point, describing the simple "white tutus, white underdrawers" made of muslin that were worn by pupils, an ensemble clearly visible in at least one of the artist's drawings, *Dancer Stretching at the Bar* (cat. 14) and in the misleadingly titled print, *Actresses in Their Dressing Rooms* (cat. 17), which surely shows partly costumed dancers." Other accounts elaborate on the situation, as in the story of the hilarious reception that greeted one beginner when she attempted to introduce a hint of embroidery into her exercise outfit.<sup>7</sup> Another contemporary records the notorious appetite of the "rats" for gifts of jewelry, but there is every reason to believe that the ribbons, colored sashes, floral head-dresses, and other decorations visible in such rehearsal scenes as *Dancing Lesson* (cat. 29) and *The Ballet Class* (cat. 8) were expressions of pure artistic license on Degas' part.<sup>53</sup>

Less frequently analyzed are the rooms in which Degas' ballet exercises take place, which were again determined more by his tastes and painterly inclinations than by historical accuracy. When Degas made his first pictures of the dance, performances of operas and ballets were held at the Theatre de l'Academie Royale de Musique, situated a short distance from the artist's studio in a fifty-year-old



building on the rue Le Peletier. His early representations of the stage, which show a distinctive rectangular "peep-hole" at the level of the dancers' legs and an oval, latticelike pattern along the lower balcony, are unmistakably based on this rue Le Peletier theater, while many of the rehearsal scenes that accompany them are similarly set in rooms that can be identified on the same site.<sup>3</sup> Not long before the opening in 1875 of the new Opera (fig. 5) - a vast and extravagantly ornamented edifice designed by Charles Garnier and located in the center of the city-the old rue Le Peletier structure was accidentally burnt to the ground, along with the bulk of its stage sets and its complex of corridors, vestibules, and practice rooms. Just as this combination of events obliged the Opera to transform its public image and parts of its repertoire, so we might have expected Degas to reconstruct his vocabulary of the dance. Surprisingly and rather revealingly, the opposite happened. To a large extent, Degas chose to disregard the elaborate new foyer *do in danse*, in which formal rehearsals were now held, as well as Garnier's spectacular auditorium and most of the Opera's new productions, and to continue for many years to depict his dancers in the long-vanished spaces of the rue Le Peletier. Where distinctive architecture can be seen in works of the mid and late 1870s, such as the tall windows and leafy courtyard of *Dame Rehearsal* (cat. 2), it is clearly a reminiscence of the destroyed structure, while the soiled rooms often used by Degas' rehearsal classes are manifestly not those "with fluted columns, gilded chandeliers, painted panels and ceiling medallions" described in the Palais Garnier, as the new building became known."

If Degas pictures of the dance show fictitious gatherings in defunct interiors, what can be said with certainty about the real world occupied by the model who posed for the *Little Dancer At'M Founenr*. Through the slenderest of coincidences - the inscription of a fragmentary address and the name "Marie" on one of the preparatory drawings (cat. 43) -and some keen detective work, earlier researchers have been able to establish that the subject of the sculpture was entirely factual. She was Marie van Goethenr, a dancer at the Palais Garnier who came from a Belgian family living in Paris, whose mother was a laundress and father a tailor." They lived in the rue de Douai on the lower slopes of Montmartre, just a few

doors from Degas' opera-loving friend Ludovic Halevy and a block or two from the studios and apartments rented by Degas in this area during the period in question.' - Such geographical proximity may well have brought sculptor and model together, leading to a sustained professional relationship with the family that evidently lasted for several years. Marie was one of three sisters-the others were Antoinette and Louise Josephine - all of whom passed through the dance classes at the Opera; a reference to "Antoinette Vangutten - aged 12" in a notebook used by Degas until about 1874 suggests that the eldest girl had posed for some of the artist's earliest ballet pictures."

Given that Marie reached the age of fourteen in February 1873 and that the *Little Dancer* was almost complete in April 1880, it would appear that the extraordinary cycle of drawings related directly or obliquely to the sculpture - some ten sheets in all, incorporating around thirty complete or partial studies of the figure-were made during this two-year period, if not in a more concentrated burst of activity (see cats. 344, 35, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, and fig. 19).<sup>41</sup> Marie was clearly a regular visitor to Degas' studio, posing both clothed and naked for the artist, and returning to model for other pastels and paintings well into the following decade. A slightly later notebook confirms the artist's contact with her some time between 1880 and 1884, while Browse and others have seen the echo of Marie's youthful physique, pert features, and briefly famous long hair in a number of later works." Somewhat confusingly, the seated and rather comical chaperone in the magnificent canvas of *The Ballet Class* (cat. 8) was said by Mary Cassatt to be based on the young dancer, where the standing figure at the right of the same picture seems a much more likely candidate."<sup>42</sup> In the delicately improvised study for this individual, *Two Dancers* (cat. 7), we sense the same adolescent uncertainty that informs the *Little Dancer*, as well as such identical features as the receding chin and childish slender arm. By the mid 1880s, the ballerina identified by Lillian Browse as the older Marie van Goethem had advanced in both stature and prominence; a pastel entitled *Dancer with Long Hair* (cat. 9) and a series of related works show a mature performer in a starring role, now accompanied by her own attendants.<sup>47</sup>

In other respects, Marie van Goethem's life as a dancer appears to have remained largely undistinguished, if characteristic of many hundreds of other peers who graced the corps de ballet. She was barely noticed in the voluminous, coyly intimate journalism that occupied itself with events surrounding the Opera, though in the early 1880s - "Mademoiselle Van Goethem" earned a brief mention as a "model . . . for painters, who is frequently seen at the Brasserie des Martyrs, the Nouvelle Athenes cafe and the bar of the Rat Mort."<sup>44</sup> All three of these establishments were closely linked to bohemian artistic circles, and suggestions that Marie herself was often to be found there ("I could tell you things to make you blush or make you weep," continued the author) were intended to hint at a somewhat lax way of life. After this date, little is recorded of her activities, though there has been some confusion over the careers of the three van Goethem sisters; Louise Josephine is known to have worked as a ballet teacher, while Browse suggests that Marie became a *sujet* or middle-ranking dancer, continuing her association with the Opera until as late as 1914.<sup>45</sup>

Almost none of this information, of course, would have been available to visitors at the sixth Impressionist exhibition, where Degas' sculpture was announced in the catalogue - starkly and anonymously - as *Petite Danseuse de quatorze ans (statuette en terre)*.<sup>46</sup> Crucially, however, Degas chose to pinpoint the dancer's youthfulness, not just in her proportions and distinctive physiognomy but

in his specification of the model's age, the first and last time he was to do so in the title of one of his pictures or sculptures. For Degas' audiences in 1881, such details were loaded with meaning, defining the young girl as a representative of a clearly defined stratum of her profession and of certain of the hazards, aspirations, and contradictory values of contemporary ballet. That the *Little Dancer* was seen in this way is apparent across the spectrum of the 1881 criticism, where the sculpture is reviled or revered as if it were a real, living individual and simultaneously treated as a paradigm of society's ills. In the late twentieth century, it is difficult to imagine a world where the figure of an unknown dancer could stir such passions or where the dance itself still occupied a central position in the metropolitan imagination. Far from being an esoteric activity followed by the few, ballet at the Opera filled the gossip columns and reviews, featured in cheap illustrations and widely read novels, and supported a cult of personality that has few rivals even today. Analogies have been proposed with cinema in the golden age of Hollywood or television in our own time, but both cases fall short of the mark, missing the extraordinary fusion of the highest artistic standards with the most blatant and officially sanctioned vice, and the concentration of both in a single edifice, the Palais Garnier. It was here, at the cultural heart of Paris - "the cradle of the dance," according to the choreographer and authority on the ballet, Arthur Saint-Leon - that visiting kings and princes were entertained by the state, and here also that internationally renowned celebrities - such as Rosita Mann, a dancer who earned 40,000 francs a year and was portrayed by Degas - were besieged by their admirers." It was under this same roof that Baron Haussman, the architect of the rebuilt city, began his scandalous liaison with a young ballerina, and it was in the foyers and reception rooms that reputations were famously destroyed, fortunes were lost, and a bizarre semi-official prostitution was conducted.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the public spectacle and backstage cavottings of the Opera formed part of the daily fare of Paris, finding expression in engravings and *carte-de-visite* photographs, newspaper cartoons by Daumier, Gavarni, Bertall, Cham, and many lesser talents (figs. 9 and 13), and a steady stream of booklets of instruction, solemn treatises on the dance, and publications with such suggestive titles as *Behind the Curtain* and *These Young Ladies of the Opera*.<sup>1</sup> If those who saw the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* knew little of Marie van Goethem, they were certainly conversant with her world, whether they attended performances (several of the critics at the 1881 exhibition-among them Ephrussi, Clarerie, and Silvestre -were regulars at the Palais Garnier) or followed the fortunes of its stars from a distance. Prominent in the city's folklore was the image of the "rat," the young trainee dancer who represented the lure of stardom and the rigors of professional life, as well as its vulnerability to corruption. Traditionally, Kahane tells us, these "rats" were recruited from families of dancers or from those

of distinctly modest origin or irregular status. Around 1850, more than half the certificates of engagement at the school of dance indicate that the children had no known father and that their mothers were concierges, laundresses etc. The situation evolved between 1870 and 1900 with the arrival in the corps de ballet of young Italian dancers from more respectable backgrounds (such as Mann, Subra, Zambelli) and young girls from good families (such as Cléo de Mérode, who became the mistress of Leopold II, King of the Belgians)."

In 1856, Saint-Leon could still deplore the haphazard education of the "rats," protesting that "a true school of dancing does not exist and has never existed," but



Fig. 6 Paul Renouard, *First Ecernses*. lithograph, from the *Gazette de Beaux-Arts*, 1881.

by the time the van Goetheln sisters took up their studies, the situation had been considerably regularized." Apprentices began their instruction between the ages of five and eight, progressing to the corps de ballet and through the various stages of *coryphee*, *petit sullet*, and *premier sujet* and ultimately to the level of *eroile*, according to their talent, dedication, and success in attracting patronage." A lithograph by Degas' admirer Paul Renouard (fig. 6), published in 1881, shows the start of this process, as a debutante struggles to master her first steps, while another illustration by the same artist (fig. 7) depicts an older group gathered around a drawing (apparently by Renouard himself) based on a sequence of dance positions." In Degas' pastels, younger pupils are often shown accompanied by their mothers or a chaperone figure, as in the dramatically composed *Dance Examination* (cat. 15), allowing the artist further opportunities to contrast his mature, clothed characters with the beginners' relative fragility.

As they proved their aptitude and physical suitability, the girls embarked on an increasingly demanding regime of daily exercise and occasional subordinate appearances on the stage. "We cannot imagine the courage, patience and incessant work required to become a talented dancer," wrote Albert Vizentri in 1868, some ten years before the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was begun:

The true dancer is obsessed with her art and sacrifices everything to it. At sixteen as at thirty, she must undergo the same painful exercises; stretching at the barre, lifting oneself at the knees, *plies*, *ecartes*, leaning back until the limbs creak in unison, exhausting oneself, making oneself continually hoarse, accepting neither fatigue nor sluggishness, these are the daily routines of the dancer who, after attending classes from nine until one, and rehearsal from one until four, appears in the evening with a smile on her lips to perform as a sylph as if nothing had happened."

As a fourteen-year-old, Marie van Goethem may not yet have arrived at this exhausting schedule, though the advancement of individuals varied dramatically with their accomplishment; the title role in Saint-Leon's *Coppelia* of 1870, for example, was created by Giuseppina Bozzacchi, an unknown from the Opera dance school who was just sixteen, while another little dancer aged fourteen, the



Fig. 7 Paul Renouard, *The Children's Dance Class at the Opera*, lithograph, from the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. 1881.

American prodigy Augusta Maywood, had made an even more sensational debut on the Paris stage some three decades earlier.";

There was considerable ambivalence among admirers of the ballet about the effects of this punishing routine on the physique of the young dancer. From the beginning of the century, pupils had been advised to develop "graceful and supple movements" and a "decent voluptuousness in their attitudes," in the words of the ballet instructor Charles Blais, and were often urged to model themselves on famous works of art, such as the *Venus Belvedere* or the "nymphs of Corot." Perversely, however, the very exercises that prepared the "rats" for their profession were seen to prejudice their glamour, one English writer observing that the "effects of this artificial existence . . . were painfully visible . . . their cheeks hollow and pale . . . their limbs nipped and wasted," and Ernest Chesneau deploring the "thinnesses" and "professional deformities" of the modern dancer. Experts on the ballet had for some time insisted that candidates be selected with its athletic demands in mind, explaining that the appropriate bodily characteristics "pronounced almost certain success to those that possessed them." Georges Duval, author of an 1875 booklet called *Terpsichore: pent ouide d PnsaQc des amateurs de bollcts*, went on to enumerate the preferred qualities of arms, legs, and body in a young girl entering the profession, explaining that the "dancer should have the greatest facility in the hips, so that the movement of the thighs is free and the knees are turned out."

Degas' alertness to the progressive stages of the ballet dancer's formation and subsequent career is touchingly evident in a succession of his works of art. Seen together, his dance images of the 1870s can seem documentary, almost filmic, as he traces a variety of individuals through their early steps and nervous preliminary examinations, through the rituals of the barre, the dressing room and the rehearsal, to their first stage appearances and eventual rise to stardom, and even beyond, into dignified retirement. Though the episodes of this store are scattered across several media and fill dramatically varied frames, we can also follow the maturing of the dancer's physique, beginning with the angular child and advancing to the ampler forms of executants long past their prime. In the drawing *Little Girl Practicing at the Bar* (cat. 10) we see the still-unformed ingenue at her exercise, while the same eight- or nine-year-old recovers gratefully from her labors in *Ballet Girl in Repose* (cat. 11). Significantly, both drawings carry the artist's own inscriptions, such as "emphasize the elbow bone" and "battements a la seconde," as if Degas was also learning the protocols of the dance and the finer points of its execution. Now some years older, a similarly fine-limbed individual posed for *Dancer with a Fan* (cat. 10), a stockier adolescent labors awkwardly in *Dancer Stretching at the Bar* (cat. 14), and a cluster of young hopefuls train under a dancing-master in *The Ballet Class* (cat. 8). By the time they reach the *Dance Rehearsal* (cat. 2), a group of more confident and physically mature apprentices seem accustomed to their shadowy backstage life, if only as a necessary prelude to the brilliance of their solo debut. In the wonderfully exuberant *Three Ballet Dancers* (cat. 22), the moment of exposure on stage has arrived, the gymnastic preparations of the dance school triumphantly vindicated as the ballerinas display their finest pas de chat or most flirtatious pas battu in the glare of the footlights.

As with so many aspects of its identity, the place of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in this professional saga is defined only by its imprecision, the model seemingly poised between childhood and maturity, between the potential of a highly trained young body and the moment of its artistic fulfillment. Typically, a fourteen-year-old pupil would have been studying for six or seven years and

moment, a glimpse of the model when she is self-absorbed and somewhat off her guard. This is certainly how his contemporaries saw the figure, treating its subject as an idiosyncratic individual caught at a revealing, imperfect moment. Though the critic of the London-based *Artist* magazine insisted that the "ballet dancer is in the act of dancing," the majority accepted that she was tired after training, agreeing with Charles Ephrussi that we see her wearing "her working clothes, weary and exhausted, relaxing her worn-out limbs." Clearly shocked that they were not presented with a stereotypical beauty from the *corps de ballet*, many recoiled from this vision of ordinariness. Paul Mantz complained that she was dirty, his colleagues that she was "frightful" or "odiously ugly," while the outraged Elie de Mont asked why the artist had gone out of his way to choose such a curiosity: "I don't ask that art should always be elegant, but I don't believe that its role is to champion the cause of ugliness."

More explicit were the insinuations that the young dancer was already, or would soon become, sexually dissolute. Seeing young the sculpture "the savage inelegance of the schoolgirl who is turning into a woman and for whose diplomats will make fools of themselves," Mantz believed that Degas had "picked a flower of precocious depravity from the espaliers of the theater." For Ephrussi, the Little Dancer represented "the Opera rat in her modern form, learning her craft, with all her disposition and stock of bad instincts and licentious inclinations," just as he sensed "the intimate allure and profession of the individual." Startling though these implications are for modern admirers of the work, they were commonplace in the literature surrounding the ballet in the nineteenth century and rooted in the well documented and often grim facts of the dancers' existence. As Martine Kahane explains, such individuals "were excessively badly paid," their conditions frequently turning "these precocious children into prostitutes" whose ambition was "to find themselves a titled protector who would ensure them a decent existence." Some succeeded spectacularly, adding to a roll-call of legendary marriages into the nobility of Europe and the world of high finance, while many were obliged to compete for the favors of the wealthy male clientele of the Opera.

Both police and theater authorities turned a blind eye to the sexual traffic associated with the dance, which was protected by some of the most powerful male institutions in the city and effectively encouraged by certain features of the Palais Garnier itself. From its inception, the foyer de la danse in the new building was intended to combine several functions, ranging from a formal reception room to a rehearsal hall for the *corps de ballet*, but its most celebrated use was that of "a place of rendezvous and for passing the time" for the privileged *abonnes*. The objects of their attentions were often the more senior ballerinas (juniors and male dancers were officially excluded) and it was acknowledged by Garnier himself that the foyer had been partly designed to show-off their charms, as they postured - "coquettishly and picturesquely costumed" - before, during, or after performances. Along with the novelists, dramatists, caricaturists, and humorists of his day, Degas helped to make the relationship between the *abonnes* and their prey into one of the emblems of the age. In the lithographs of Lami and Daumier, the backstage studies of Forain, Renouard and Beraud, and the pastels and nonotypes of Degas, the black-suited *abonnes* is an ever-present, rapacious specter in the dancers' universe, loitering in the wings, invading the stage during intervals and, in prints like *Aniline* and *Virginie Corwarsin* with Admirers (cat. 6) and in the *Foyer* (cat. 5), ambushing the "rats" in corridors and reception rooms. In their turn, dancers and actresses who ruined their lovers with demands for jewels,

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Fig. y Alfred Grevin, Pie Dautc Pupils, illustration from the Pctit Journal pour rice, no. 293.

carriages, and apartments took on near-mythical Status, analyzed at length in novels like Zola's *Varia* and celebrated in countless images in the popular press. One such work. Alred (:resin's *The Dance Pupils* (fig. 9), published on the front page of the magazine *Petit Journal pour rirc*, openly signals the carnal nature of the young pup ambition as well as the complicity of her mother and friend in the project. Here Grevin - draftsman, theater designer, and founder of the Paris svaxxvork nulseurn - seems to identity, himself with another of the city's causes, Saluting the aspiring "rat" as a scxudll adventurer, even as a vernacular heroine, while a some\yhat pun-laden caption refers frankly to tier future earning power...

If the physical allure of tlae ballet for its predominantly male followers was freely acknowledged, the reality behind the dancer's reputation was already in doubt. More than a decade before the *Little Dam-er* appeared, the tar-from-prudish Goncourt brothers noted that "te%ver than a dozen dancers" were actually Supported by the rich lovers of legend and claimed that a majority of the corps de ballet "lead a tatnily life. Many live with their mother or have an attachment to a workman." Several contemporary authors, among them the Cornte de Maugny, argued that the long hours of the dancers' training left them with little tinge for amorous adventure, and Kahane proposes that, in practice, the "rats" could be divided into two types: the "naive, pure young girl dedicated to her art" and the "flighty kept svonaan, multiplying her affairs and ruining her admirers." A pertinent case of the former was provided by the Mante sisters, daughters of a "respectable" professional family known socially to Degas (at one date, they lived in the same building as the artist) with a long-standing association with the Opera, where the father, Louis-Anaedee Mante, played the double-bass for almost half a century.' All three Mante girls embarked on the ballet and posed occasionally in Degas' studio, with Suzanne. Blanche, and their mother providing the subject for two pastel groups and - according to information given by the elderly sitter to Lillian Broxvse - Suzanne modeling for such drawings as *Little Girl PracticinY at the Bar* (cat. 12) and *Ballet Girl in Repose* (cat. i f)." In contrast to Grevin's drawing, the accent in the Philadelphia version of the pastel (fig. 10) is on the vulnerability of the daughter preparing for the ballet, here accentuated by the proximity of her more securely costumed sister and the warm, enveloping presence of Madame Mante. Again contrary to the legend, both rls progressed through the hierarchies of the dance establishment and graduated to become instructors in their own right, remaining kith the company for many years."

In the majority of cases, of course, the private lives of individual young dancers, whether Suzanne and Blanche Mante or Marie van Goetheni, remained unknown to those who saw Degas' paintings and sculpture, and thus irrelevant to the impact of specific works of art. More than such localized biographies, it was "the myth of the dancer" - as Kahane has called it - the image of "the loose woman who clestroved the fortunes of great worldly figures" that dominated the imaginations of late-nineteenth-century audiences, just as it has persisted into our own selectively informed views, of the dance. When writers and journalists reported on the ballet, the sexual spectacle of performances and backstage spaces was often taken for granted, dancers attracting as much comment for their looks as for their athleticism or professional skill. Commentators like Vizentini and Mahalin referred openly to both the appearance and private behavior of individual ballerinas, their published remarks about "elegant knees," "large lips," and a dancer's "embonpoint" offering a virtual directory of available charms." In such an outwardly formal society, the Opera supplied one of few opportunities to glimpse the lightly clad female form, a fact recognized by the grandest as well as



[Fig. 10](#) *The Affair Family*, ca. 1886, pastel, 34.4 x 24.1 in. (88.1 x 61.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Given by Mrs. John Wirttersteetr.

the more scurrilous observers of the day. In a review of the 1876 Impressionist exhibition, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote of the "semi-nakedness of the young ballet dancers" in Degas' rehearsal pictures, and in 1871 Jules Claretie could allude to the "seductive curiosities" visible in such works, while the first enthusiast for the foyer admitted that many went there principally to "look closely at the legs of Miss 13.

Even closer to home, Degas' writer and librettist friend Ludovic Halevy gave definitive form to the sexually available "rat" in a series of widely read stories, published during the 1870s and collected under the title *Les Pamilles Cardinalières* (1858). The first tale, *L'Herminette Cardinal*, which appeared in 1870 and was set in that year, introduces us to the daughters Pauline and Virginie, both still in their teens but already habituated to the ways of the Opera and well advanced -with the help of their formidable mother - along its professional and amorous paths." As in Grevin's cartoon, the mother-chaperone figure of the stories is brazenly concerned with her offspring's advancement, Madame Cardinal encouraging the approaches of the wealthy and slightly improbable Marquis Cavalcanti to the thirteen-year-old Virginie while maintaining the apparent respectability of her household. Hypocrisy and misleading appearances are the unifying themes in tales that range over the double standards of their parents and the daughters' manipulation of a variety of lovers, ending with Pauline's abandonment of the ballet and of her outward propriety when she becomes *la petite trahison*. The sisters, their mother, and Halevy himself also appear in a suite of more than thirty dazzling black-and-white monotypes made by Degas in response to these stories in the years between 1876 and 1877." Though never used as illustrations in the published volume of Halevy's tales, the rapid brushwork and skittish compositions of Degas' prints, such as *Pauline and Virginie Cavalcanti with their admirers* (cat. 6), capture the illusory forms of the young Cardinals' world, contrasting the fragile whites and silvers of the dancers with the somber, black-suited aboams. With the lightest and most incisive of touches, Degas encapsulates both the comedy and the threat of this backstage choreography, in *the Fohrr* (cat. 1) presenting a caricatural male voyeur as he feasts his eyes on the suddenly accessible form of a *Little Dancer*-like ballerina.

In almost every sense, it seems, Degas was complicit in the public and private experience of the dancer, attending performances, annotating her off-duty encounters, and hiring underpaid pupils to model in his Montmartre studio. For Degas, as for the frock-coated aboams, the ballet was a pretext for licensed proximity to the female body, sanctioned by art and encouraged by the camaraderie of the predominantly male audience. If he lacked the means at this date to become an abomme himself, he was well acquainted with many stalwarts of the Opera and knew that the apartments of some of them - such as Isaac de Camondo, Jean-Baptiste Faure, Count Ludovic Lepic, Ludovic Halevy, and Charles Ephrussi - were hung with his pictures of the dance." More than is sometimes appreciated, these pastels and paintings were projected at a discerning, ballet-obsessed circle, made by an artist who knew both his subject and his clientele and their openness or otherwise to artistic experimentation. If an admirer in 1880 could hail "Degas, the painter of dancers" for his "keen and accurate observations" of life behind the proscenium, the same writer could note of *Die Dance Examination*, "At first sight it is disagreeable to the eye, but one grows accustomed to it." This conjunction of approval and perplexity might be said to summarize the contemporary response to Degas' ballet imagery, not least the flurry of comment that surrounded the first appearance of the *Little Dancer* in 1871. Fluent in the ways of the Opera, few of his contemporaries

questioned the precision of Degas' depiction of his chosen model, nor the details of her physique, clothing, and self-presentation; what irritated them was the artist's boldness in taking them beyond their comfortable assumptions about the dance and the conventions of sculpture. Given the models available, Elie de Mont asked, "Why did he choose this one?"; knowing the beauties to be found at the Opera, Paul Mantz demanded, "Why is she so ugly?"; acknowledging that such individuals existed in the "depths of the dance schools," Henri Trianon inquired, "What have they to do with the business of sculpture,": and, baffled by almost every aspect of the work, "Our Lady Correspondent" wailed, "Can anyone calling himself an artist more hopelessly degrade what he ought to reverence and love?"

When we look at the *Little Dancer in White* today, it is only with difficulty that we decipher the facts and fantasies that have attached themselves to the work, both in our own time and in the milieu that first gave it meaning. What is overwhelmingly evident is that, from its inception, Degas chose to engage with one of the most resonant images of his day, an image that was seen by his peers to link high art with the gutter and to provoke anxiety as much as approval. More versed than we in these social semaphores, Degas' audiences were either thrilled by its novelty or exasperated by its awkwardness, while none seemed indifferent to the sculpture's presence. Those accustomed to the sparkling elegance of Garnier's auditorium were perplexed by the elevation of a mere "rat" - dressed in exercise clothes and perhaps unwashed - to such prominence, while the "adepts" of the new art (groups of "nihilist men and women," as one visitor described them) were enthralled by its audacity. Experts in the dance were able to concede the "singular exactitude" of the work, while those expecting titillation were thwarted at every turn by the indifferent expression of the dancer's pinched features or by a lack of voluptuousness in her young body. And for established followers of Degas' art, here was another challenge: a colored, three-dimensional object by a painter they knew well, leading them from the familiar illusions of pictorial space to the treacherous pseudo-realities of sculpture.