

THE FRICK COLLECTION

MEMBERS' MAGAZINE SPRING / SUMMER 2002



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Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805),
detail of *Head of a Woman*, c. 1765,
red chalk on paper, private collection

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEAN-MICHEL ROUTHIER

THREE DRAWINGS BY EDGAR DEGAS: A RESEARCH CHALLENGE FOR THE FRICK ART REFERENCE LIBRARY

Imagine you are a collector of drawings by Impressionist artists. Three exquisite sheets said to be by Degas have just appeared on the art market. Two capture a pair of ballerinas in action and repose, the other a single dancer with her back to the viewer, her head bowed in a moment of reflection. You are seriously considering adding these drawings to your collection, but how can you be sure of their history? How can you even know if they are by Degas?

To answer such questions, each year thousands of scholars, curators, art historians, and students visit the Frick Art Reference Library to research issues of authenticity, provenance, and conservation. For them, the Library is an invaluable resource, famed for its collection of books, auction sale cata-

logues, and extensive photoarchives. Yet for countless others, its riches and the myriad ways they can be used remain a mystery. One common misconception is that the Library holds materials related only to works in the Collection. In fact, the Library contains photographs of, and information about, tens of thousands of works of art executed between the fourth and the mid-twentieth centuries by European and American artists.

To research the questions about the Degas drawings, you might begin by consulting one of the Library's thousands of scholarly exhibition catalogues, which offer a user-friendly starting point that can lead to other basic sources. In this case, the catalogue for the major Degas retrospective of 1989 held in Paris, Ottawa, and New York notes that

the most complete source for Degas' work remains the four-volume catalogue raisonné published in 1946 by Paul André Lemoisne, a copy of which the Library owns. The exhibition catalogue also states that the contents of Degas' studio, more than fifteen hundred of his works, from finished paintings to preparatory sketches, was sold at four Paris auctions in 1918 and 1919. Luckily for you, the Library holds one of the world's largest collections of auction sale catalogues—more than seventy thousand, dating from 1616 to the present—including the four from the 1918 and 1919 Degas auctions.

Casting a sharp eye over the illustrations in the Lemoisne catalogue raisonné, you find three paintings whose compositions include figures identical in pose to those in the draw-



Photographs of preparatory sketches ascribed to **Edgar-Hilaire-Germain Degas** (1834–1917), from the Frick Art Reference Library Photoarchive. At the time they were photographed, 1933–57, the drawings were in private collections.



ings you are researching. One painting, *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage*, is a fascinating *grisaille* in the Musée d'Orsay; the other two are versions of that painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. More importantly, you learn that some twenty preparatory studies for these works have been identified. Are your drawings three more? Turning to the four auction catalogues, you search for your three drawings, eventually discovering photographs of two of them that were auctioned from Degas' atelier. (As a result of your research, you now recognize the red faux-signature "Degas" stamped on the sketches as the official mark carried by all works in the 1918 and 1919 atelier auctions.)

To continue your search, you next turn to the Frick Photoarchive, which contains nearly one million photographs of works by more than thirty-five thousand artists, including more than seven hundred photographs of Degas studies of ballet dancers alone. Acquired from the 1930s to the 1990s from sources as varied as private owners, dealers, museums, subscription services, and the Library's own photography campaigns, these photographs record owner and exhibition information over decades. Indeed, the



PHOTOGRAPH ©1978 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Library photographs, taken by staff photographers between 1922 and 1967, often are unique records of privately owned works. Although it takes time to sift through the vast Degas material, you uncover images of twelve preparatory studies for *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage*, including a match for the third drawing, which you now realize lacks the atelier stamp borne by the other two. The photograph is of a drawing from a private collection in New Orleans taken by a Frick photographer in 1933. Does this suggest that the drawing might have traveled to New Orleans with Degas when he went there in 1872? Or does it suggest that Degas' very presence in New Orleans may have sparked a particular interest in collecting works attributed to him?

In the end, thanks to your research at the Frick Art Reference Library, you have learned that two of the drawings you are considering for purchase are unquestionably by the master, while the other was previously unknown to most Degas scholars. The next step is to consult a Degas specialist; perhaps your research has uncovered something new! —Inge Reist, *Chief of Collections Development and Research*

ABOVE LEFT:

Degas, *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage*, c. 1874, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

ABOVE RIGHT:

Degas, *The Rehearsal on the Stage*, c. 1874, oil with traces of watercolor and pastel over pen-and-ink drawing on paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection