

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Female Dancers in Violet Skirts by Edgar Degas



Title:	Female Dancers in Violet Skirts (Arms Raised)
Maker:	Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917)
Medium:	Pastel and black chalk, perhaps with gouache over charcoal on two sheets of tracing paper joined together, laid down on paper
Date:	c. 1895-98
Dimensions:	h. 90.9 x w. 52.1 cm
Museum No:	PD.2-1979
Gallery:	5

Key Dates for Degas

1834	Born Paris into rich Franco-Italian banking family
1847	Mother dies
1853	Abandons his law studies to take up painting
1854	Studies with Louis Lamothe who was a disciple of Ingres. Conventional training. Makes first of several trips to Italy to study Old Masters
1855	Meets Ingres
1862	Meets Edouard Manet
mid 1860s	Turns to modern themes, particularly contemporary Parisian life
late 1860s	Used jockeys and racehorses as subject matter
1860s	Series of portraits
1870	Serves in Franco-Prussian War – damage to eyesight
Early 1870	First ballet subjects
1872	Visits relatives in New Orleans
1874	Father dies leaving vast debts. Helps organise first Impressionist exhibition
1874-86	Takes part in seven of the eight Impressionist exhibitions showing works of themes of dancers and scenes from the Paris Opéra, milliners and laundresses
1894	Dreyfus scandal – Degas found himself marginalized from many longstanding liberal friends because of his right wing and anti-Semitic views
1895-98	PAINTS SERIES OF DANCERS IN VIOLET SKIRTS
1909-II	Stops work completely because of failing eyesight
1917	Dies in Paris

Degas drew and painted, as well as sculpted, dancers from the early 1870s until the end of his career. As with all his subjects he made a number of on-the-spot studies in graphite, charcoal and chalk. However, unlike his Impressionist colleagues such as Monet and Renoir, he composed his finished works behind the closed doors of his studio.

Degas first began to use pastel in the late 1850s but it was later in his career (1880s-1890s) that he evolved the complex technique that we can see here. This pastel was probably drawn between 1895 and 1898, and is one of a series of at least nine large-scale compositions showing dancers in similar poses. In each of the versions Degas reworked, and sometimes reversed, the poses of the two dancers, sometimes adding a third. He also subtly modified the background, the angle of vision and the position of the limbs. These massive, gently swaying figures remain individuals, but are also fused together. Degas stated that his reason for obsessively painting the ballet was to find 'the movement of the Greeks'.

Pastel is a very delicate medium, which is why this work is not always on display in the galleries of the Fitzwilliam Museum. Recent research has helped us to understand the way in which Degas supported and manipulated the pastel. He mostly used a tracing paper support, laid down on a sheet of stronger white paper or Bristol board. He rubbed the surface with pumice stone, wood-shavings or sand to give 'tooth'. He then applied pastel mixed with casein, shellac, gelatine or gum arabic, or dispersed in an aqueous substance (sometimes by blowing boiling water over the surface to create a paste). On top of this base, Degas then worked in a series of expressive graphic gestures. Degas's constant reworking of the surface meant that individual compositions could take months or, as in this case, years to complete.