

DYLAN KLEMPNER

How Degas Influenced Picasso

Eye-opening exhibit opens at the Sterling and Francine Clark Museum

Picasso turned to Degas at least twice in his career, according to Richard Kendall, an impressionist scholar and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute's curator at large. The most famous case occurred when Picasso—then in his seventies—became interested in a group of brothel monotypes, which Degas had made a century earlier.

Picasso bought nine of the prints, and a few years later he made etchings, also brothel scenes, that are riffs on Degas, "but because [Picasso] had a very good sense of humor, he introduced the figure of Degas himself into his brothels," says Kendall. He and Picasso scholar Elisabeth Cowling are the first to bring these groups of works together in a new exhibition at the Clark, *Picasso Looks at Degas*.

The scholars present new connections between the artists' lives and reveal the extent to which the younger artist was fascinated by the elder's art and personality. The majority of the material in the catalog is completely new to Picasso and Degas experts, said Kendall.

Picasso Looks at Degas is a narrative that begins with Picasso as a teenager and continues to the end of his life, says Cowling. It features everything from little sketchbook drawings to large world-class masterpieces by the artists.

Kendall and Cowling, who have been friends for more than a decade, both had their first conversations about Degas' influence on Picasso and other early twentieth-century artists as early as 1996. That year Kendall curated an exhibition at the National Gallery in London, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*.

"It was all late work," says Cowling, "sculpture, paintings, pastels." Although Degas had his roots in the nineteenth-century, he had a big impact on artists like Picasso and Matisse. Because the exhibition emphasized the lesser known, experimental aspects of Degas' work, Cowling says, "It really changed a lot of my thinking about Degas."

In 2004, Kendall formally approached Cowling about collaborating on an exhibition. The scholars began to meet periodically in Paris, in Edinburgh—Cowling's home—and at the Clark.

PICASSO LOOKS AT DEGAS

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The term "influence" is too simple a concept for the Picasso/Degas relationship, which can vary from admiration to a kind of glorified theft, says Kendall. "You get some rather obvious rip-offs of Degas' art when Picasso was nineteen or twenty," he explains. The younger artist did pastels of women singing in cabarets, just as Degas did. Picasso also did pastels and paintings of nudes combing their hair and washing their bodies, which were famous Degas subjects.

One exceptional pairing juxtaposes Picasso's dramatic blue-gray *Nude Wringing Her Hair* (1952) with Degas' late red-pink *Combing the Hair* (c. 1892–1896).



Left: Edgar Degas, *Combing the Hair (La Coiffure)*, c. 1892–1896, oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London. Bought 1937 (NG 4865). © National Gallery London.

Right: Pablo Picasso, *Nude Wringing Her Hair*, 1952, oil on wood panel. Private Collection. © 2010. Estate of Pablo Picasso / ARS, New York.

The scholars also propose that Picasso was directly influenced by Degas' ballet art and that he made a number of ballet paintings, drawings, and pastels that are an homage to Degas, says Kendall. Two good cases of Picasso's awareness of Degas' dance art are Picasso's 1919 drawing of two dancers on stage (at MOMA) and the sculptures of bather/dancers he made soon after he had seen Degas' bronzes in the early 1930s.

"Picasso's sculptures were made in a matter of weeks after going to an exhibition of Degas' sculpture," says Cowling. In the spring of 1931, Picasso had been working on a series of large plaster heads inspired by his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter in his sculpture studio in Normandy. In the autumn, after seeing *Degas: Portraitiste, Sculpteur* at the Orangerie in Paris, Picasso started making smaller plaster sculptures of running female figures including *Bather with Raised Arms* and *Bather*. They are often described as bathers, but Cowling believes it's no coincidence that they look like Degas' sculptures of performing dancers.

During one of their trips to Paris, Kendall and Cowling visited where Picasso first lived when he came to the city in the early 1900s. "I wanted to link this with where Degas had a studio," explains Kendall. "The wonderful fact is that when Picasso first got lodgings in Paris, he was about a five-minute walk away from Degas' studio."

While living in Paris, the artists had friends in common and shared models—young women who went back and forth between Degas' and Picasso's studios. "Picasso may have welcomed the idea that he was drawing from a model that Degas had drawn. That may well have inspired him," says Kendall.

Another connection between the two artists, says Cowling, was their determination to be sculptors as well as painters. While both artists had received academic training as draftsmen and as painters, neither had been taught the technical demands of sculpture. "They had to make it up as they went along," she says. Both artists were prepared to break the rules and to learn by experience.

X-rays have revealed that the artists periodically used found objects in their sculptures. Degas stuck pieces of cork, bits of wood, and metal into his sculptures, said Cowling. Picasso used whatever materials came to hand, including old pieces of newspaper and chicken wire.

Both artists' modeling techniques were expressive and experimental, says Cowling. They

enjoyed working with their hands, which went into their paintings and prints as well. They sometimes used their fingers when painting. They rubbed and used rags.

When Picasso made the prints of brothel scenes, Cowling believes that he identified with the physical relationship between the artist and his medium—Degas used his fingers to make his monotypes. "I can see exactly why Picasso loved them because you can actually see how they're made," Cowling says.

Cowling says that late in his career, Picasso habitually used works of art from the past that he admired as a springboard for his own work. He had been interested in artists like Van Gogh, Cezanne, Goya, and Rembrandt, and often liked to gossip about them.

Degas' personality particularly fascinated Picasso because they were such different people in many respects, says Cowling. Their relationships with women was the most obvious difference. Picasso had numerous female friends. He was sexually active in the extreme from an early age, and much of his art turns on the theme of sex.

Degas was the utter opposite to Picasso in that respect. At the time Picasso was composing his etchings, many people thought that Degas might have been a virgin, says Cowling—even though most of Degas' art is about women and the female form. Cowling believes that the discrepancy between the known life of Degas and content of his art fascinated Picasso. He may have tried to account for the fact that Degas, who was reputed to be chaste, had produced so many images of prostitution and many thousands of images of women.

In the etchings, Picasso reflected on Degas' psychology, says Cowling. He very often shows Degas in the brothel as a martyr to chastity or inhibition. His arms are tied behind his back. Sometimes he looks terrified. But there he is in the brothel again and again and very often very close to the women.

Kendall believes that even people who know nothing about art will be utterly fascinated to see these two great artists together. "And while the exhibition will offer viewers a lot of guidance, people are free to make up their own minds and find connections we may not have thought about."

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Top: Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, bronze, with gauze tutu and silk ribbon, on wooden base. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. Photo: Michael Agee. Above: Pablo Picasso, *Standing Nude*, 1907, oil on canvas. Museo del Novecento, Milan (8750). © 2010. Estate of Pablo Picasso/ ARS, New York