Early Years: Drawing and the Human Figure

Throughout their careers both Degas and Picasso focused primarily on the human figure, an obsession that had its roots in their early art-school education. Separated by almost half a century, both began their training by drawing, first from plaster casts, then from posed nude models, and by copying great figurative art from the past. Degas quickly rebelled against this system and embarked on a long study tour of Italy. Picasso, who revealed outstanding talent as a child and was directed by his art-teacher father, refused to complete his training at the Real Academia de San Fernando in Madrid and, aged sixteen, began consciously emulating more abstracted, vanguard styles. Nevertheless, for the rest of their lives drawing remained the corner-stone of both artists’ work, although Picasso, unlike Degas, would later work from memory and the imagination rather than hired models.

Pablo Picasso
Self-Portrait
1896 - Oil on canvas - 32.9 x 24 cm
Museu Picasso, Barcelona (MPB 110.076)
© Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

Edgar Degas
Self-Portrait
c.1857-1858 - Oil on paper mounted on canvas
26 x 19 cm - Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1955.544)
© Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA
Photo by Michael Agee)

Pablo Picasso
The Old Fisherman
1895 - Oil on canvas - 83 x 62.5 cm
Museu de Montserrat, Barcelona
Gift of Joseph Maria Sala i Ardis (N.R 200.502)
© Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010
Early Years: Drawing and the Human Figure

Pablo Picasso Self-Portrait
Picasso was only fourteen or fifteen when he painted this formal, bust-length self-portrait, but he already showed as much concern with inner mood as outer appearance. Precociously adept at absorbing differing sources, he fused discreet allusions to the great seventeenth-century Spanish masters with a contemporary realist style indebted to photography.

Edgar Degas Self-Portrait
Degas was living in Italy when, at age twenty-three, he executed this penetrating self-appraisal. Wearing a white artist’s smock and a soft hat to shade his eyes from the sun, he presented himself as a committed painter, the loose brushwork and bold contrasts of color and tone reinforcing this image.

Pablo Picasso The Old Fisherman
Studies of picturesque human types played a part in the education of nineteenth-century artists. This work also reflects Picasso’s response to the dramatic realist style of the Spanish masters seen some time earlier on his first visit to the Prado.

Edgar Degas Roman Beggar Woman
Painted in Rome during his years of study in Italy, this superb canvas reveals the sophisticated skills that Degas had already acquired. Scenes of picturesque or poignant local figures had a wide popularity and gave Degas the chance to represent a real — rather than an idealized — individual he had encountered.

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Paris: Picasso Discovers Degas

In their different circumstances, portraiture allowed both Degas and Picasso to progress beyond academic subject matter to contemporary urban imagery. In 1899 Picasso joined Barcelona’s Quatre Gats group and fell under the influence of Catalan artists, such as Ramon Casas, who had visited Paris and seen the work of the Impressionists, including Degas. Picasso’s strongly characterized portrait drawings made at the turn of the century resemble not only those by Casas, but also by Degas and his Parisian followers. Picasso first visited Paris in 1900, when the city’s glamour and artistic prestige were at their height. He stayed with Catalan friends in the artistic quarter, Montmartre, and reveled in the famous bars, cabarets, and street life. Degas was then in his sixties and lived nearby, and was still admired for his pioneering pictures of these subjects. By 1904, when Picasso settled in Paris, he had already produced many caricatural cabaret scenes and also responded directly to some of Degas’s most celebrated and controversial pictures, notably *In a Café (L’Absinthe)*.
Paris: Picasso Discovers Degas

**Pablo Picasso** *Portrait of Sebastià Junyer i Vidal*

As he grew in confidence, Picasso tackled some of Degas’s most well-known works in a respectful yet openly competitive manner. Echoing the scene of drinkers in Degas’s *In a Café (L’Absinthe)*, this painting is bleaker in tone and more direct in suggesting the dissolute life of one of Picasso’s friends and his female companion.

**Edgar Degas** *In a Café (L’Absinthe)*

Considered shocking when exhibited before 1900, Degas’s painting of two of his friends posed in a café was regarded as an image of bohemian dissolution. Known to Picasso either firsthand or in reproduction, it prompted a series of large and small variants in which the younger artist seemed to compete with his predecessor.

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**Pablo Picasso** *Portrait of Sebastià Junyer i Vidal*

1903 - Oil on canvas - 126.4 x 94 cm
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, David E. Bright Bequest (M.67.25.18) © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

**Edgar Degas** *In a Café (L’Absinthe)*

1875-1876 - Oil on canvas - 92 x 68.5 cm
Women and their Private World

Although a lifelong bachelor reputed in his own day to be a misogynist, Degas was so fascinated by women that they dominated his work in all media. Alongside numerous portraits that are notable for their sympathy, penetration and honesty, he produced hundreds of images of women washing themselves and doing their hair, rejecting mythological subject matter in favor of contemporaneity. For Picasso too, women were always the prime subject, and as with Degas portraits of women in his circle coexist with generic images of nudes. In 1906, when toilettte scenes briefly dominated his work, Picasso adopted a willfully “primitive” form of classicism, drawing inspiration from Degas’s daringly simplified late style. The posthumous sales of the contents of Degas’s studio in 1918–1919 brought a flood of unknown drawings and paintings onto the market. Picasso’s interest in Degas was reignited, and for the rest of his life he periodically produced suites of toilette scenes, never imitating Degas closely but acknowledging his precedent by echoing his most characteristic poses and devices.
**Women and their Private World**

**Pablo Picasso  *The Blue Room (The Tub)***
This vivid painting shows the apartment Picasso rented after his successful exhibition at Ambroise Vollard’s gallery in 1901 (some unsold pictures and a poster by Toulouse-Lautrec are shown on the walls). Posing his model in a zinc tub, Picasso paid homage to Degas’s bathing scenes, including the lithograph shown nearby.

**Edgar Degas  *Woman Ironing***
Degas made many paintings of Parisian laundresses at work, showing both their drudgery and the bareness of their surroundings. In this superb example he emphasized the muscular effort of the woman’s task and noted the bowl of water used for dampening clothes, both features that Picasso “borrowed” for his own laundress scenes of 1901–1904.

**Pablo Picasso  *Woman Plaiting Her Hair***
In 1906, Picasso generally achieved his most monumental effects in his painting, working on a grander scale and representing the body more forcefully than in his sculpture. The restricted palette, inconsistent handling, and visible alterations to this composition suggest the influence of both the style and the imagery of Degas’s late drawings.

**Edgar Degas  *Combing the Hair (La Coiffure)***
Between about 1920 and 1936 this painting belonged to Picasso’s friend Henri Matisse. The numerous signs of revision, bold draftsmanship, urgent brushwork, and fiery color scheme dramatize the ostensibly peaceful ritual of haircombing, providing a model for the expressive simplifications and emotional tension of Picasso’s late figure style.

**Pablo Picasso  *Nude Wringing Her Hair***
Picasso’s highly charged reinterpretation of the classical motif of Venus wringing her hair may reflect both personal troubles and anguish caused by the Korean War. But the hasty revisions to the composition, emphatically spontaneous technique, and dramatic use of monochrome are reminiscent of Degas’s style in late, unfinished works.

*Image not available for web uses*
The Ballet: Homage and Humor

Degas was known to Picasso’s generation as “The Painter of Dancers.” Picasso showed little interest in ballet as a young man, but later a growing fascination with Degas’s art gradually extended to his dance imagery. During Picasso’s early years in Paris, he made several startling responses to Degas’s celebrated *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, which he probably knew through hearsay and reproductions of its preparatory studies. He became more familiar with Degas’s ballet pictures when large numbers were displayed in Paris after the artist’s death in 1917. By this date Picasso was working on stage and costume designs for the ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev, and had met his future wife, the ballerina Olga Khokhlova. Just as Degas had depicted dancers on the stage and in the classroom, Picasso made studies of Olga and the Diaghilev company. Roughly a decade later, Picasso also created a series of small plaster figures that recall bronzes of dancers by Degas he had seen in a recent exhibition.

Edgar Degas
*Dancers in the Classroom*
c. 1880 - Oil on canvas - 39.4 x 88.4 cm
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1955.562)
© Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA
(Photoby Michael Agee)

Edgar Degas
*Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*
1879-1881 - Bronze, with gauze tutu and silk ribbon, on wooden base - height 99 cm - Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1955.45) - © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA (Photo by Michael Agee)

Pablo Picasso
*The Dwarf*
1901 - Oil on cardboard - 105 x 60 x 0.4 cm
Museu Picasso, Barcelona (MPB 4.274)
© Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

Pablo Picasso
*Yellow Nude*
1907 - Watercolor, gouache, and India ink on paper - 59.8 x 39.5 cm - Gretchen and John Berggruen, San Francisco - © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010
The Ballet: Homage and Humor

Pablo Picasso *The Dwarf*

Though his model was a vaudeville artist rather than a ballerina, Picasso has echoed the stance of Degas’s *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in this defiantly garish painting; note especially the position of the right leg and the arm held behind her back. Significantly, the height of the picture — like Picasso’s *Standing Nude* nearby — is closely comparable with Degas’s sculpture.

Edgar Degas *Jove ballarina de catorze anys*

First exhibited in Paris in 1881, this sculpture was originally made in wax and dressed in a tutu and a wig of real hair. Known to Picasso by reputation, its radicalism prompted him to paint young dancer-like figures in Expressionistic and Cubist styles, and apparently to consider a comparable sculpture of his own.

Pablo Picasso *Yellow Nude*

Painted as his celebrated canvas *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was approaching completion, Picasso’s *Yellow Nude* combines the sexuality of his brothel scene with the angularity of African sculpture. The figure’s distinctive pose, with right leg forward and arms behind the back, also seems to recall Degas’s *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*.

Edgar Degas *Dancers in the Classroom*

The ballerinas in this painting are not involved in a formal class, but stretch themselves at the barre or rest from their exertions. Degas made many hundreds of studies of such figures, often in the form of drawings, apparently inspiring Picasso to explore the same theme in the 1920s.
Picasso's Bather-Dancers

Degas made sculptures in wax, clay, and other materials throughout much of his career but exhibited only one in public: Little Dancer Aged Fourteen. After his death in 1917, seventy-four surviving sculptures — many of them representing nude ballerinas — were cast in bronze. They were then exhibited widely, including an important display in Paris in 1931. Picasso is known to have seen this exhibition and may have been inspired to make some plaster sculptures of dancer-like figures on a similar scale. Witty and imaginative, Picasso's dancer-bathers seem to acknowledge his predecessor without imitating him.
Picasso’s Bather-Dancers

Pablo Picasso *Running Woman*

The most exuberant of Picasso’s small sculptures from this period, Running Woman might almost be a drawing in space.

Edgar Degas *Grand Arabesque, Second Time*

Degas’s ballerina is less unconventional but more emphatically projected in three dimensions. Like many such works, Picasso’s figure was made in plaster and later cast in bronze.
Brothel Scenes: the Artist as Voyeur

The monotypes depicting life in Parisian brothels that Degas created in the late 1870s had a unique appeal for Picasso, whose own earliest images of prostitution were produced shortly before his first visit to Paris in 1900. It may have been Ambroise Vollard — the gallery dealer who hosted Picasso’s first Parisian exhibition in 1901 — who introduced the young Spaniard to this little-known aspect of the Frenchman’s work. Between 1958 and 1960 Picasso realized a long-standing ambition when he acquired nine of Degas’s brothel monotypes, and it was in his late work that his admiration found its most explicit expression. Echoes of Degas’s imagery and technique abound in numerous prints produced in 1968, and in March 1971 Picasso began a series of thirty-nine etchings in which Degas appears as a client visiting a brothel. Convinced that Degas resembled his own father, and regarding him as an alter ego, Picasso continued to portray Degas in his drawings until a few months before his death, at age ninety-one, in April 1973.

**Edgar Degas**
- *Resting on the Bed*, c. 1876-1877 - Monotype - 12,1 x 15,9 cm
- Private collection, Switzerland

**Pablo Picasso**
- *Degas with Elasticized Boots and Two Prostitutes, One on an Upholstered Napoleon III Chair*, 19-22 March 1971 - Etching on copper printed on paper (Artist proof I/XV) - 36,5 x 48,6 cm
- Museu Picasso, Barcelona (MPB 112.189)
- © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

**Edgar Degas**
- *Courtesans*, c. 1876-1877 - Monotype - 16,1 x 21,2 cm
- The National Museum in Belgrade [Serbia].
- Collection: Graphic Arts Cabinet (Inv. 1632)

**Pablo Picasso**
- *The offering*, 1908 - gouache sobre carton con 1908
- Gouache on cardboard paper with white primer
- 30,6 x 30,6 cm - Museu Picasso, Barcelona (MPB 112,761) - © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

**Pablo Picasso**
- *Prostitute with a Bracelet and Degas with His Hands behind His Back*, 30 March 1971 - Etching (Artist proof I/XV)
- 36,7 x 49,1 cm - Museu Picasso, Barcelona (MPB 112.231)
- © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid 2010

**Edgar Degas**
- *Self-Portrait*, c. 1885 - Original print with modifications, Inscribed on the reverse in Picasso’s hand ‘Portrait P.H. / de E. Degas’ - 18,2 x 24,2 cm - Private collection. Courtesy Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte
**Brothel Scenes: the Artist as Voyeur**

**Pablo Picasso The Offering**
Made in the wake of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), Picasso’s masterpiece on the theme of prostitution, this gouache evokes the power of women over men. The composition recalls Degas’s monotype (shown in facsimile in the case) of prostitutes offering bouquets to their madame on her name day.

**Edgar Degas Self-Portrait**
When or how Picasso acquired this photograph is unknown, but it was certainly on display in his studio in Cannes in 1958-1959, when he formed his collection of monotypes by Degas. Alterations to the photograph, which originally included Degas’s housekeeper, were probably made with a view to publication before Picasso obtained it.

**Pablo Picasso Degas among the Prostitutes. First Appearance of Degas**
This is the first in the suite of thirty-nine etchings to depict Degas. Echoes of his monotypes and of Picasso’s own brothel painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) are accompanied by a witty allusion to Degas’s notorious sculpture *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in the hands-behind-the-back pose struck by both Degas and the prostitute facing him.

**Edgar Degas Resting on the Bed**
Picasso owned a copy of Ambroise Vollard’s edition of *La Maison Tellier* and knew this monotype from the reproduction there. In 1958 he purchased one with very similar voyeuristic iconography. These monotypes inspired the etching shown nearby, in which an anxious Degas has been lured onto the grinning prostitutes’s bed.