NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

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With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen, Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House, Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley, Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán, James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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112 | Entrance of the Masked Dancers (L'entrée des masques) c. 1879

Pastel on gray wove paper, 49 x 64.8 cm
Lower left: Degas
1955.559

Only a handful of the many hundreds of ballet scenes made by Degas were publicly associated with a stage production during his lifetime. *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* was one of these important exceptions, appearing with the title *Ballet de Don Juan* in an illustration in Georges Lecomte's study of the Durand-Ruel collection, published in 1892.[1] Through much of the nineteenth century, *Don Juan*—or *Don Giovanni*—was the principal work by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the repertoire of the Paris Opéra, where it was augmented by *divertissements* or danced interludes according to the custom of the period. Degas is known to have been an admirer of Mozart's music and in later life revealed that another of his pastels, *The Chorus* (1877; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), was based on a scene from the same opera; recent research has uncovered further examples of Degas's engagement with *Don Giovanni*, proposing an additional seven works as responses to rehearsals or performances.[2]

Entrance of the Masked Dancers is untypical of Degas's ballet pictures in several other respects, not least in its technical history. Though complex and ambitious as an arrangement of forms, spaces, and gestures, the composition seems to have been arrived at without preparatory drawings, a rare case of an improvised major work in Degas's art. Signed and sold soon after completion, the pastel was not treated with fixative by the artist, another uncharacteristic omission on his part.[3] Perhaps most extreme of all, however, is the suggestion that this apparent spontaneity was an expression of Degas's direct relationship to the depicted subject. Implicit in the dramatic structure of *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* is the artist's presence at the boundary of the spectacle, where looming, brilliantly hued ballerinas crowd against him in the wings and spotlighted action unfolds just a few

feet away. The chalkiness of scenery and the texture of muslin are conjured up in coarse flourishes of pastel, and the blur of such elements as the foreground tutus is juxtaposed with more sharply focused passages elsewhere. We share the artist's perspective, our attention thrust forward by a series of diagonals as if we too are part of the offstage traffic, while contrasts of scale and value add to an exceptional assault on our senses. As much as any major work of Degas's mid-career, *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* fuses raw color and inspired draftsmanship to evoke the vibrancy of modern sensation.

The theme of a ballet performance viewed from the wings was surprisingly slow to establish itself in Degas's mature repertoire. After the auditorium and classroom scenes of the early 1870s, Degas became increasingly adventurous in both his pictorial strategies and his physical relationship to the stage. By the second half of the decade, a sequence of small oils, pastels, and monotypes—including *The Chorus* of 1877—moved his vantage point from a seat in the main body of the theater to positions near the proscenium, high up in the "gods" or even behind the curtain itself. These initiatives were prompted by a number of factors, among them Degas's recent prints of café-concert singers seen from oblique angles and at close quarters, their torsos cropped by the frame and their heads stark against pools of light and shadow.[4] A comparable, near-vulgar presumption informs *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*, where the viewer implicitly invades the ballerinas' professional space and observes their intimate adjustments of tutus, tights, and personal accessories.[5] In such works Degas effectively left the audience to join the company, claiming the viewpoint of the dancers, technicians, and occasional authorized male onlookers to be found in the wings. His presence is wittily echoed by a diminutive gentleman in black attire at upper left, in a similar location at the opposite side of the stage; though such figures were commonplace in popular illustrations of the period, often representing predatory *abonnés* (or Opéra subscribers) with privileged access backstage, they occur only infrequently in Degas's pastels and paintings.[6] Here, the identity of the male onlooker is left unexplained, though in Lecomte's text he is assumed to be a "clubman waiting for the return of a dancer."[7] Contemporary sources, including Degas's own *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* of 1874 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris),[8] show that theater officials of all kinds—including stage managers—were also required to wear top hats and formal dress. In the Clark pastel, the distant male arouses as little response from the corps-de-ballet as the artist himself, whose proximity is a matter of almost exaggerated indifference to the principal dancers.[9]

The forcefulness of Degas's subject takes on additional meaning when the familiarity with such backstage scenes of both the artist and the first owner of the picture is taken into account. It is now clear that by the early 1870s, if not before, Degas was closely acquainted with scores of artists and production staff at the Paris Opéra, some with the power to introduce him to areas of the building denied to the general public. Several of his close friends were *abonnés*, and there are strong indications that Degas joined them on occasional visits to the exclusive on-stage boxes and to the wings during performances. Though Degas himself is not recorded as an *abonné* until the early 1880s, his acutely topical and informed scenes of the ballet evidently appealed to this wealthy élite, several of whom bought examples of his art.[10] Léon Clapisson, the purchaser of *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*, was one such figure, an Opéra *abonné* who had the right to watch dancers from the partial seclusion of the scenery, like the "clubman" in his pastel. Clapisson emerged as a significant collector of Degas's pictures around 1880, acquiring five works by the artist; significantly, all of them represented ballet subjects, while four focused on the close-up contacts with dancers that were a principal attraction of the *abonnés'* world.[11]

Despite the extreme immediacy of the finished image, it is almost certain that *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*—like the great majority of his ballet scenes—was executed in Degas's studio. A rapid pencil study, *Dancer on Stage* (fig. 112.1), conceivably made on the spot, may have provided the starting point for the design, but its context is quite different.[12] In the absence of true preliminary studies for the work, we are left to reconstruct its evolution from close scrutiny of the picture and its paper support. A vertical crease in the sheet between the two principal ballerinas indicates that it was once folded in half; initially, this reduced area seems to have been used to draw a single dancer, before the larger scene was conceived. Executed in charcoal, this drawing was neither as detailed nor as extensive as in many comparable pastel studies: there are few signs of lines in the lower part of the rectangle or in the background, for example, or of modeling on the dancers' limbs. Either before or after the first application of color to the figure, the sheet must have been opened out and a sec-

Fig. 112.1 Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Dancer on Stage*, c. 1877–80. Pencil on paper, 23.8 x 15.9 cm. Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, London

ond ballerina drawn on the newly extended surface, resulting in a strikingly symmetrical—and thus, for Degas, highly unusual—design. Gradually integrating the stage setting and the distant corps-de-ballet into the ensemble, Degas again applied his pastels with great boldness over minimal underdrawing and opted for a direct, sensuous technique.[13] The foreground elements were also considerably enhanced, notably in the powerful articulation of the two dominant dancers and the refinement of their distracted expressions, and the development of the scenery flat hiding the audience at left. Certain areas in faces and clothing were finely nuanced, but a form such as the lower right arm of the ballerina in pink was defined entirely through adjacent blocks of pastel, not by means of line. Allowing the granular texture and warm gray tint of the paper to remain widely visible and contribute to the color scheme, Degas nevertheless signaled his satisfaction with the picture by signing it, presumably when it was sold to Clapisson.

The distance between Degas's methods of fabrication and his direct experience of the stage has encouraged the view that pictures such as *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* were "deliberate creations, constructed of poses and settings combined and recombined at will."[14] The artist himself insisted on the "artifice" of his craft, while a number of works close to *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* reveal such practices as the use of a single drawing to make several different compositions and the hiring of dancer-models to reconstruct their stage or classroom roles on his Montmartre premises.[15] The drafts of the two principal ballerinas in *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* were perhaps begun in this way, conceivably as successive drawings made in one studio session from the same dark-haired model. Degas then appears to have departed from his normal procedure by developing a complex stage scene directly on this initial sheet. Now free to embellish his design, he could vary the ballerina's costume from pink to complementary aquamarine, or whimsically introduce a stage flat that seems to double as a pair of butterfly-like wings. Locked into a finished work of art, his original drawn studies were necessarily unavailable for use elsewhere, precluding the recurrence of these distinctive dancers in any of Degas's later ballet compositions. Such technical inventiveness in the studio, however, must always be set against the artist's documented presence at numerous Opéra productions, his access backstage, and his precise recollection of costumes, set designs, and sequences of choreography.[16] While remaining "deliberate creations," images such as *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* retain their plausibility as reports of first-hand encounters, exploiting Degas's practical ingenuity but also relying on the "prodigious memory" admired by his contemporaries.[17]

Though Degas's attendance at the Paris Opéra before the 1880s is not annotated in such detail as in later years, it can be shown that his links to *Don Giovanni* were extensive and remarkable. In the two productions of this opera that were mounted during his early career, for example, we can point to the artist's friendships with the chief conductor and one of the dancers in the 1860s version, and to close contacts with the choreographer of the 1875 staging, Louis Mérante, and with the singer of the lead role, Jean-Baptiste Faure, who was another prominent patron of Degas's art.[18] Tellingly, in all his pictures of *Don Giovanni*, Degas stayed close to his practice of bypassing celebrity on the stage; in *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*, the emphasis is almost entirely on the corps-de-ballet at its most anonymous. Neither the dancer in pink nor her near-twin in green is recognizable among the young stars of the day, even if their faces seem familiar in the artist's current roster of models.[19] Characteristically, he also avoided the grand set-pieces and intricate scenery for which the Opéra was famous, choosing instead a transitional moment

in Mozart's narrative that resists easy identification. The episode represented in the Clark pastel occurs at some point during the complex events surrounding *Don Giovanni*'s masked ball, which in Degas's day was located in Act II.[20] This act is played out in the gardens and grand ballroom of Don Giovanni's palace, as mysterious masked figures arrive and there is dancing of various kinds by cast and chorus in appropriate costumes. Contemporary theatrical accounts do not record these sequences in detail, but the line of ballerinas in pale gold costumes with miniature hoods and masks was clearly one of them, apparently taking place in an outdoor, park-like setting.[21]

Entrance of the Masked Dancers was listed by Léon Clapisson in two handwritten catalogues of his collection that bear the dates 1879 and 1882 respectively.[22] Clapisson, son of the composer Louis Clapisson, was a man of means who bought large numbers of Impressionist and other French nineteenth-century paintings around this time, many of them from the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. On stylistic, technical, and conceptual grounds, *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* is unlikely to have been made much before 1879 and can thus, in conjunction with the manuscript catalogue, be dated to this year with some confidence. Hoping to capitalize on his investment, Clapisson sold some of his acquisitions in 1885 and then more in 1891, when *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* was purchased by the Durand-Ruel Gallery, entering Paul Durand-Ruel's private collection some time afterward.[23] In the 1892 volume on these works, Lecomte responded vigorously to the qualities of the pastel, contrasting the "great turbulent cube" of the stage and its "pale electric radiance" with the gloom and the "calm intimacy" of the wings. Describing the foreground figures as "agitated, gasping for breath" after their exertions, he imagined them returning to the ballet, smiling again as they made "a gracious and painful gesture."[24] Around the turn of the century the picture was both published and exhibited on a number of significant occasions, joining a still very limited group of Degas's images available in reproduction.[25] Durand-Ruel clearly valued the work highly, and it was retained in his family for more than thirty years, before being sold directly to Robert Sterling Clark in 1927.[26] Now considered too fragile to travel because of its unfixed surface, *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* has been little exhibited outside the Clark, though it continues to be anthologized with Degas's major achievements and singled out as "one of the most dynamic of all his stage creations."[27] RK

PROVENANCE Léon Clapisson, Paris (probably by 1882–91, as *Deux danseuses*, sold to Durand-Ruel, 19 May 1891); [Durand-Ruel, Paris, from 1891]; Paul Durand-Ruel (by 1901–d. 1922); estate of Paul Durand-Ruel, on deposit at Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York (from 1922, sold to Clark, 28 Apr. 1927, as *Entrée des masques*);[28] Robert Sterling Clark (1927–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS London 1905a, no. 67, as *The Masked Ballet Girls*, lent by Durand-Ruel; London 1905b, p. 13, ill., as *The Masked Ballet Girls*; Paris 1917, no. 21, as *L'entrée des masques*, lent by Durand-Ruel; Paris 1924c, no. 131, ill., lent by Joseph Durand-Ruel;[29] Williamstown 1956a, no. 100, pl. 17; Williamstown 1959c, no. 2, pl. 17; Williamstown 1970, no. 8; Williamstown 1987, no. 56, ill., as *Entrance of the Masked Dancers: Scene from "Don Giovanni"*; Williamstown 1988c, no cat.; Williamstown 1995b, no cat.; Omaha–Williamstown–Baltimore 1998–99, p. 174, no. 20, ill. (exhibited in Williamstown only); Williamstown 2004b, no cat.; Williamstown 2005–6b, no cat.; Williamstown 2007b, no cat.; Williamstown–Barcelona 2010–11, pp. 140, 142, 338, fig. 157 (exhibited in Williamstown only).

REFERENCES Lecomte 1892, pp. 63, 157–58, ill., as *Ballet de Don Juan* (print by A.-M. Lauzet after the painting); Muther 1895–96, vol. 2, p. 739, ill. (print by Lauzet after the painting) (rev. ed., vol. 3, p. 119, ill. [print by Lauzet after the painting]); Lafond 1918–19, vol. 2, ill. bet. pp. 36–37;[30] Meier-Graefe 1923, pl. 56, as *Scène de Ballet*; Lemoisne 1924b, p. 99, ill.; Huyghe 1931b, p. 276, fig. 19; Mauclair 1937, p. 147, ill.; Lemoisne 1946–49, vol. 2, pp. 298–99, no. 527, ill.; Browse 1949, p. 382, no. 132, pl. 132; Comstock 1956, p. 78; Frankfurter 1956, p. 43, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 37, ill.; Minervino 1970, p. 120, no. 741, ill., as *Due ballerine fra le quinte* (French ed., as *L'Entrée des masques*); Huyghe 1974, p. 79, fig. 69; Dunlop 1979, fig. 127; Brooks 1981, pp. 56–57, ill.; Gordon and Forge 1988, p. 167, ill.; Lucie-Smith 1989, p. 123, fig. 109; Milner 1990, p. 140, ill.; Boggs and Maheux 1992, pp. 78–79, no. 20, ill.; Sion 1992b, p. 47, ill.; Kostenevich 1995, pp. 80, 82, fig. 4; Kendall 1996, pp. 12, 17, 45, 77, ill.; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 72–73, ill.; *Antiques* 1997, pp. 529–30, ill.; Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, p. 349; Ferrara–Edinburgh 2003–4, pp. 148, 159, figs. 74, 79; Cahill 2005, pp. 81–82, ill.; Ganz 2004, p. 119, fig. 10; Campbell 2006–9, vol. 2, p. 141, ill.; Christie's 2008, pp. 48–49, ill.; Glens Falls 2009, pp. 98–101, no. 35, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The pastel was executed on a previously folded sheet of smooth gray wove paper. The vertical fold is in the approximate center of the sheet, and the paper has collected pastel media along the hills of the fold during execution. The paper's edges appear to be untrimmed. A tack hole on either side of the fold at the bottom edge indicates that the paper may have been tacked to a drawing board in its folded condition prior to execution.

The gray paper is adhered overall to a machine-made

wove paper slightly larger than the dimensions of the principal support. This paper mount is very brittle and has fractured around the perimeter edges. The lining may have been done prior to, or shortly after, execution in order to flatten the paper. Stray pastel marks, which extend onto the backing paper, may indicate that the drawing was lined after the initial sketch was laid out and further pastel was worked up after lining. There is only very subtle evidence of color change to the gray paper and no obvious color change to the media.

The paper color is highly visible through the media application and provides a tonal element in the final image. The media appears to have been worked dry with areas of rubbed and blended color. Some pastel has been blended directly on the surface of the paper. One area of blending to the right of the left dancer's elbow left a fingerprint, likely the artist's own. The paper does not have much tooth, so some rubbed areas appear as a smooth, uniform tone. Other areas have two or more colors visible beneath the surface pastel. There is evidence of linear work inside the foreground figures, which can be described as very sketchy underdrawing, likely in charcoal. There is also a horizon line visible through the white pastel in the middle ground. Overdrawing that defines the background figures was done in purplish blue linear outlines.

Careful microscopic testing of at least six color areas did not reveal the use of fixative anywhere on the surface. Nonetheless, the media is in very good condition. There are a few minute blue dots in the pink skirt of the right-hand figure. These are not evidence of fixative, but of displaced blue pastel from the background areas above. The surface is very velvety and undisturbed, although somewhat flattened overall; under oblique light, it appears to have been once placed face down or pressed overall, possibly in a mounting process. LP

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1. Lecomte 1892, p. 63; the illustration is an etching by A.-M. Lauzet. For other representations of specific ballets and operas, see Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, chap. 6. Given Degas's close association with Durand-Ruel, we might have expected the title of the illustration to be the artist's own, but see note 22 below.
2. For a detailed discussion of *Don Giovanni* in the repertoire of the Opéra and the relationship of Degas's art to contemporary productions, see Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, pp. 158–61. For his reference to *The Chorus* (L 420), see Halévy 1960, p. 113 (English ed., p. 93).
3. Examination of Degas's pastels has shown that the majority were fixed, almost certainly by the artist; see, for example, Boggs and Maheux 1992, and London–Chicago 1996–97, pp. 98–99.
4. See Boston–Philadelphia–London 1984–85, nos. 25–26, 29–31, and 34–35. Two lithographs of dance scenes from c. 1878–80, nos. 37 and 38 in the same catalogue, may have bridged the gap between the cabaret images and a work such as *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*.
5. Almost imperceptibly, the dancer in green appears to lift her tutu to adjust her undergarments.
6. *Abonné* figures are most common in Degas's monotypes of backstage scenes, such as the *Famille Cardinal* series. For an extended assessment of these issues, see Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, chap. 3.
7. Lecomte 1892, p. 158: "un clubman qui attend le retour de la sauteuse."
8. L 340.
9. Their indifference is so marked that the spectator, paradoxically, might almost be at a distance, as if viewing the scene through opera glasses from the depths of the wings.
10. The detailed evidence for Degas's access to the backstage world, his own acquisition of an *abonnement* in 1882 or earlier, and the role of *abonnés* as patrons of his art, is assembled in Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, pp. 14–15, 77–79, 106, 147.
11. Clapisson is recorded as an *abonné* in an official list of 1882: see Patureau 1991, p. 348. For his collection, see Anne Distel, Appendix 2, "The Notebooks of Léon Clapisson," in Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, pp. 346–56. The works by Degas that he owned are identified as L 527, 698, and 736, BR 86, and an unspecified *Petite danseuse (effet de lampe électrique)*. The source from which Clapisson purchased *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* is not recorded.
12. A second loosely related study is Georges Petit 1919a, no. 217, p. 177.
13. There appears to be no drawing of any kind beneath the masked dancers on the stage and no preparatory sketches for them exist.
14. Williamstown 1987, p. 70.
15. Degas's remark is cited in Hertz 1920, p. 20: "Art is the same word as artifice, which is to say, something deceptive" ("L'art, c'est le même mot qu'artifice, c'est-à-dire une chose trompeuse"). The pastel and gouache *Dancers in the Wings* of c. 1879 (L 585), for example, was centered on a preparatory study of one such girl, who reappeared in two contrasted classroom scenes before being featured several years later in its backstage setting. The drawing in question, *Dancer Adjusting Her Slipper* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is uncatalogued. It was also used in composing L 341 and L 343.
16. For a review of these subjects, see Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, chap. 6.
17. Fevre 1949, p. 60: "une mémoire prodigieuse."
18. See Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, pp. 158–61.
19. For example, the young dancers at center and extreme right of the Clark's *Dancers in the Classroom* (cat. 114) have sometimes been linked with the model for Degas's sculpture, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, Marie van Goethem.
20. Incomplete records survive of two revivals Degas must have known, those launched at the rue Le Peletier Opéra in 1866 and at the Palais Garnier in 1875; typically for this period, their *livrets*—or production booklets—do not indicate at which points in the narrative the ballet

divertissements occurred. A *livret* published in 1873 makes it clear, however, that the famous masked ball was set in Act II, Scene 8, in this instance, when various "masked and disguised" figures danced in the spectacular ballroom. Other scenes surrounding these events took place in the gardens, which evidently form the background for the Clark pastel. In Scene 7 of this production, three of the principals sang the "trio des masques," but this is wrongly identified in Williamstown 1987, p. 70, as the subject of *Entrance of the Masked Dancers*. Further details of these stagings are in Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, chap. 6.

21. Few costume designs for the dancers in *Don Juan* are preserved, though sketches for short hooded capes remarkably similar to those in *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* were made for the 1864 ballet *La Maschera* and may have been copied or recycled for the later production, as was the practice at this date. The designs are in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra: ref. no. D. 216 (22), plates 43–45.
22. See note 11 above. These dates may relate to the beginning of Clapisson's cataloguing process and do not therefore preclude the addition of subsequent works, though it seems likely that *Entrance of the Masked Dancers* was bought between 1879 and 1882. Clapisson refers to the picture as *Deux danseuses*, perhaps using his own description of its subject or conceivably a title proposed by the artist.
23. A letter of 24 Apr. 2001 from Caroline Durand-Ruel Godfroy in the Clark's curatorial file has confirmed the purchase of the picture by Durand-Ruel in 1891.
24. Lecomte 1892, p.158: "sur la scène illuminée des blafards rayonnements électriques. . . . Haletantes, le corps en émoi . . . elles en ressurgiront de nouveau pour quelque gesticulation gracieuse et pénible. Par delà l'intimité calme de la coulisse, par delà le grand carré turbulent de la scène lumineuse."
25. It was included in the historic exhibition of Impressionist works in the Grafton Galleries, London, in 1905 and in the Galerie Paul Rosenberg exhibition a few months before the artist's death. Its appearance in Georges Lecomte's and Richard Muther's publications, and in the catalogue of the 1905 exhibition, ensured the work an extensive early exposure.
26. References in the Lemoisne provenance to the ownership of the picture by Robert Treat Paine (Lemoisne 1946–49, vol. 2, no. 527), and in Boggs and Maheux 1992, no. 20, p. 78, to its presence in the Georges Viau collection, appear to be unsubstantiated. After Paul Durand-Ruel's death in 1922, the picture remained with the family until its sale to Clark in 1927.
27. Detroit–Philadelphia 2002–3, p.101.
28. According to the Durand-Ruel Archives, the painting was placed on deposit with Durand-Ruel, New York, on 30 Aug. 1926, and recorded in the Paris gallery on 28 Mar. 1927. Since it was not owned by the gallery, however, there is no mention in the gallery records of its sale to Clark. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001 in the Clark's curatorial file.
29. Joseph was Paul's son, and was director of both the Paris and New York branches of the firm.
30. The illustration is labeled "Collection de M. G. Viau." There is no other evidence, however, to suggest that the pastel was in the collection of Georges Viau.

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113 | Portrait of a Man (Diego Martelli) c. 1879

White chalk and oil on panel, 40.9 x 32.2 cm
Gift of Dorothy M. Skinner and John S. Cook
2006.11

Portrait of a Man (Diego Martelli) is the most recent work by Degas to be added to the Clark's collection of paintings. Uncharacteristic of the artist's output as a physical object, untypical of his techniques, and lacking a complete historical provenance, this modest picture has nevertheless been accepted as an authentic work by Degas for almost half a century. A plausible candidate for its subject has also been proposed, though no explanation has been offered for Degas's decision to depart from his usual working practices when making this study.

Degas's traditional skills as a portraitist were already evident in his small *Self-Portrait* of 1857–58 (cat. 110), executed in Italy some two decades before the present work. Linked to a substantial group of drawings, paintings, and an etching of his own face from the same period, this canvas also echoed a long-established tradition of the portrait as self-reflection that reached back to the Renaissance. By the time he created *Portrait of a Man (Diego Martelli)*, Degas had turned his attention firmly toward the world of contemporary Paris and to the faces of the writers, musicians, fellow artists, and friends who now surrounded him. Such compositions were often radical in structure and handling, revealing his subjects in their casual surroundings and created in unconventional combinations of media that separated them from the modes of the distant and even recent past. Among the most audacious pictures of this kind were two large portraits of the Italian art critic and supporter of the avant-garde, Diego Martelli (1839–1896), executed by Degas about 1879.[1] Energetically painted in oil on canvas, these likenesses of Martelli were based