



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

VOLUME ONE

Edited by Sarah Lees

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

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,
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30. See, for example, L 941 and 1107.
31. See Technical Report. Degas went to considerable lengths to arrange these small-scale adjustments, adding narrow fillets of wood to the stretcher and painting the newly visible edges to match the existing surface. At least one other frieze picture (L 900) was subtly extended in this way.
32. It is not known whether the picture was bought through a dealer or directly from the artist; the tradition that the work was commissioned from Degas seems to have no documentary basis and would be contrary to his established practice. For Drake del Castillo, see http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche.asp?num_dept=2581#biographie. His acquisition of Monet's *The Beginning of the Grand Rue at Argenteuil, Winter* (W 355), on 14 April 1890, is recorded in Rewald 1986a, p. 94. In the sixth Impressionist exhibition, Raffaelli's *Argenteuil Road* was listed as belonging to Castillo; see Berson 1996, vol. 2, p. 287. His purchase of Pissarro's *Morning in June, Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône* (PDR 312) is noted in Brown 1994, p. 97n60.
33. Mme Lafond stayed at Drake del Castillo's Paris apartment in 1894; see *Paris–Ottawa–New York 1988–89*, p. 340n8. Another link between Castillo and the Pau Museum is referred to in Brown 1994, p. 97n60.
34. Reff 1976b, Notebook 34, pp. 2 and 4.
35. See *Omaha–Williamstown–Baltimore 1998–99*, p. 10.
36. Hoentschel was a major collector of European sculpture and decorative objects from earlier centuries, most of which were given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by J. Pierpont Morgan. He acquired two other dance pictures by Degas (L 868 and 1247).
37. RSC Diary, 31 Dec. 1926.
38. See Goupil Stock Books, book 15, p. 98, no. 27863.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 164, no. 28847.
40. Lemoisne 1946–49 lists Samuel Courtauld, London, as an owner after Hoentschel (see vol. 1, p. 116, and vol. 3, p. 470, no. 820), but correspondence with the Courtauld Institute confirms that this painting was not in Courtauld's collection. See letter dated 3 Nov. 1969, from Fiona Morgan to P. O. Troutman, in the Clark's curatorial file.
41. There is no invoice to Clark from Knoedler. A letter of 19 Dec. 1969 from Knoedler, London, in the Clark's curatorial file states that the branch in Paris bought this painting from the Galerie Barbazanges in Feb. 1924 and sold it to Clark the following August.

115 | Before the Race c. 1882

Oil on panel, 26.7 x 34.9 cm
 Lower right: Degas
 1955-557

The early history of *Before the Race* is preserved in several vivid and precise forms: in the stock books of Degas's principal dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, where an entry for December 1882 records its purchase from the artist for the considerable sum of 2,500 francs;¹ in a canvas by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, which shows the painting on the wall of its first owner's home (fig. 115.1); and in a letter written by Degas in January 1883 to his friend Mme Bartholomé. In the letter, he excused himself from a previous engagement and announced that "something surprising has happened," explaining that the painting in question had been acquired by the wealthy artist Henry Lerolle: "He has just, at a moment like this, bought a little picture of mine of horses, belonging to Durand-Ruel. . . . [he] wishes to entertain me with his friends and although most of the legs of the horses in his fine picture (mine) are rather badly placed, yet, in my modesty, I should very much enjoy a little esteem at dinner. Just this once, dear



Fig. 115.1 Pierre-Auguste Renoir (French, 1841–1919), *Yvonne and Christine Lerolle at the Piano*. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (inv. 1960-19)



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Madame, permit me to become intoxicated with the perfume of glory.”² Though it was entitled *Le Départ* in Durand-Ruel’s ledger, the “little picture” can be identified as the Clark painting in Renoir’s double portrait *Yvonne and Christine Lerolle at the Piano*, where it hangs near another Degas owned by Lerolle.³

Before the Race is one of three identically titled and compositionally linked scenes of the racetrack made by Degas in the early 1880s, all of which appear to have found buyers during these years: the others are in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, and formerly the collection of Mrs. John Hay Whitney.⁴ Pointedly casual in design and lively in execution, these works emerged from more than two decades of experiment in which classical and old masterly precedents were subtly absorbed into Degas’s observations of the modern turf. Analysis of his equestrian vocabulary has revealed the influence of a remarkable range of historic and more recent imagery, from studies of elegant steeds in the Parthenon frieze to his awareness of the English racing print.⁵ Directly relevant to *Before the Race* is Degas’s sustained fascination with the motif

of horses in informal procession, typically beginning in the left foreground and receding to the right in dozens of his pictures. This device has been convincingly traced to Benozzo Gozzoli’s celebrated fresco cycle *The Journey of the Magi* (c. 1459–63) in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence, which was copied by the young Degas during a visit to Italy in 1860. The debt is explicit in a drawing for one of his earliest racing scenes and still lingers in *Before the Race*, while other elements of Gozzoli’s imagery are recalled in the Clark jockey who retreats abruptly into the picture plane and his colleague who rides directly toward us.⁶

The subject and many of the features of *Before the Race* had emerged more than a decade before this picture was begun, in a diverse group of canvases of the steeplechase, the hunt, and the family horseback ride, as well as horse-racing in the conventional sense. Though historic models can still be detected in some of these scenes, the accent was firmly on the contemporary spectacle and the bourgeois rituals that accompanied it. The analogy between such scenes and Degas’s contemporary pictures of “the undisciplined *corps-de-*

ballet” was noted early and was apparently encouraged by the artist, in both his choice of pictorial devices and his preference for certain formats.⁷ Despite the clear lineage and early documentation of the Clark picture, the exact circumstances in which it was made are entirely unknown. In her thorough exploration of the theme, Jean Sutherland Boggs has found few signs that Degas himself enjoyed riding and only modest evidence of his attendance at the racetrack.⁸ Several of his friends were enthusiasts, however, and in 1872 Degas was painted into the foreground of Édouard Manet’s *Racing at the Bois de Boulogne* (formerly Whitney Collection),⁹ though four years later Degas admitted his need to “see some real racing again” in order to complete an unfinished picture.¹⁰ As with his concurrent ballet works, it appears that *Before the Race* was contrived and executed in the studio, using drawings made previously, those carried out expressly for the new image and the legendary resources of Degas’s memory. By this date, he had already mastered a jigsaw-like process of composition, in which figures and animals were lifted from one work and repositioned—sometimes in reverse—on a fresh sheet of paper or canvas. Variants of a successful scene could thus be created, as well as entirely new combinations in different settings, with quite new pictorial qualities. Almost no studies for Degas’s landscape backgrounds have survived, suggesting that effects of light and shadow, and such arrangements of hills and greenery as that in *Before the Race*, were based on impromptu brushwork or his recollections of rural excursions. In the Clark panel, a distant view of a hillside village at left includes a minutely defined steeple, similar to those in several equestrian scenes in the environs of Ménil-Hubert in Normandy, one of Degas’s favorite retreats and the site of a provincial racetrack.¹¹

As many as twenty drawings can be directly or obliquely related to *Before the Race*, some with additional ties to current or successive variants of the theme. Prominent among them are a series of sketches for the jockey in orange and gold who leans forward over his straining mount, including a vigorously executed sheet with separate observations of the horse’s head and legs.¹² The figure at extreme left is similarly found in a cluster of studies and completed works, but the remaining human and equine characters are decreasingly documented as we proceed into pictorial depth. Tellingly, perhaps, the two horses at right who advance and retreat in tandem appear to lack preparatory drawings, though the fact that each is close to one of Degas’s known copies from past art

may suggest the possibility that they were improvised directly onto the panel, using his earlier studies for guidance.¹³ While this gathering of sheets supplies most of the components of the Clark scene, no single study for the entire design has survived. Given that such a study exists for the ex-Whitney composition, it has been argued that the more extemporized *Before the Race* must have been the first of the sequence.¹⁴ Equally likely is that Degas worked on the trio simultaneously, using a common pool of drawings and carrying the resulting pictures to different levels of refinement as their subjects developed.

The extent to which Degas made drawings from live thoroughbreds is unrecorded, though the circumstances in which these animals normally appeared would hardly have been conducive to private study. Wooden models reportedly kept in his studio might well have provided assistance, but again their use must have been limited.¹⁵ A more plausible additional source for the protagonists in *Before the Race* was probably Degas’s own sculpture, as he explained in a conversation in later life. Speaking to the journalist François Thiébaud-Sisson in 1897, Degas is said to have recalled his discovery that “to achieve exactitude so perfect in the representation of animals that a feeling of life is conveyed, one had to go into three dimensions,” and his subsequent fabrication of small wax figures “in order to give my paintings and drawings greater expression.”¹⁶ These figures included sixteen statuettes of horses—some with riders—which Degas could use as substitute models, arranging them in his studio to study effects of light and patterns of grouping. The majority remain insecurely dated, though it is widely accepted that the earliest sculptures were made in the 1860s and 1870s, and would thus have been available when the Clark picture was created. Strikingly, all the mounts in *Before the Race* have some degree of affinity with a known Degas wax: the two stationary animals at left and center, for example, have many features in common with *Horse Standing*, a bronze cast of which was acquired by the keen equestrian, Robert Sterling Clark (fig. 115.2).¹⁷ The well-attested use of his wax sculptures in this capacity encourages us to believe that some of the preliminary drawings for *Before the Race*, and perhaps the final configuration of jockeys and their steeds, originated at a considerable distance from any rural context.

In a display of bravura picture-making such as *Before the Race*, Degas’s capacity to benefit from and then transcend such contrived procedures is among



Fig. 115.2 Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Horse Standing*, 1870s. Bronze, 29.1 cm (height). Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1955.568)

his defining accomplishments as an artist. Throughout the composition his brushwork is exceptionally varied and lively, hinting at nervous movement among the five horses and the blustery character of the day. Little preliminary drafting can be seen, though close scrutiny of the horses' limbs reveals their finely painted outlines and some later adjustments, evidence perhaps of the localized struggle that lay behind his self-deprecating remark to Mme Bartholomé. Elsewhere, translucent touches of green, ocher, and violet, some laid over earlier strokes, suggest the varying surface of the turf, while richer sweeps of color summarize the distant sky and scenery. In all these areas, both the grain and the natural hue of the panel are intermittently visible, establishing an autumnal warmth that gently pervades the scene. Only in the figures and animals does the paint become opaque, where Degas built up the saturated hues of fabric and hide, passages of deep shadow, and needle-sharp detail in bridles and clothing. *Before the Race* combines a high degree of finish with a remarkably persuasive sense of spontaneity, approaching—somewhat paradoxically—the plein-air achievements of Degas's Impressionist contemporaries. RK

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, Paris, 10–12 Dec. 1882, as *Le départ*; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, sold to Lerolle, 10 Jan. 1883]; Henry Lerolle, Paris (1883–d. 1929); Madeleine

Lerolle, Paris, his wife, by descent (1929–until at least 1936); [Hector Brame, Paris, by 1937, sold to Durand-Ruel, 3 June 1937, as *Chevaux de courses*]; [Durand-Ruel, New York, 1937–39, sold to Clark, 6 or 15 June 1939];¹⁸ Robert Sterling Clark (1939–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1924c, no. 45, ill., as *Le Départ d'une course (la descente de mains)*, lent by Lerolle; Paris 1931c, no. 28, as *Avant la course*, lent by Mme Lerolle; Paris 1933b, no. 108, lent by Mme Lerolle; Paris 1934, no. 84, as *Les jockeys*, lent by Mme Lerolle; London 1936b, no. 68, as *Les Courses*; Paris 1937c, no. 35, pl. 12, as *Avant la course (La descente de main)*; Williamstown 1956a, no. 99, pl. 16; Williamstown 1959c, no. 1, pl. 16; New York 1968a, no. 10, ill.; Williamstown 1970, no. 6; Williamstown 1980b; Williamstown 1984c, no cat.; Williamstown 1987, pp. 21, 67, no. 52, ill.; Paris–Ottawa–New York 1988–89, pp. 402–4, no. 236, ill.; Williamstown 1994a, no cat.; Washington 1998, pp. 124–26, 254, no. 70, ill.; Rochester 2002–3, no cat.; Baltimore–Phoenix 2007–8, pp. 114, 195, no. 37, fig. 45.

REFERENCES Lemoisne 1912, p. 78; Lafond 1918–19, vol. 2, p. 42, ill. between pp. 44–45, as *Avant le départ*; Jamot 1924, p. 140, pl. 30a, as *Avant la course*; Lemoisne 1924b, pp. 96, 98, ill., as *Le départ d'une course*; Mauclair 1937, p. 79, ill., as *Descente de main*; Guérin 1945, pp. 77–78, no. 52 (English ed., pp. 79–80, no. 61); Lemoisne 1946–49, vol. 2, pp. 398–99, no. 702, ill., as *Avant la course (Jockeys) (La Descente de main)*; Comstock 1956, pp. 41, 78, ill.; *Life* 1957, p. 10, ill.; Daulte 1960b, pp. 32–33, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 34, ill.; Wilenski 1963, p. 333; Minervino 1970, pp. 118–19, no. 694, ill., as *Fantini alla partenza* (French ed., pp. 118–19, no. 694, ill., as *Avant la course [Jockeys]*); Monneret 1978–81, vol. 3, p. 141, ill.; Dunlop 1979, p. 180, fig. 171; Carpenter 1982, pp. 4–6, figs. 1-4, 1-5; Johnston 1982, pp. 134–35; London–Paris–Boston 1985–86, p. 266 (French ed., p. 294); Brooke 1985–86, p. 114, ill.; Gordon and Forge 1988, pp. 78–80, ill.; Schneider 1989, pp. 3, 39, ill.; New York–Houston 1994, pp. 133–35, fig. 117; Shackelford 1996, p. 144, ill.; Providence 2005–6, p. 56, fig. 39; Copenhagen–Columbus 2006–7, pp. 101, 103, fig. 98; Campbell 2006–9, vol. 2, p. 268, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support is a mahogany panel 0.6 cm thick with the grain running horizontally. The panel has a slight twist in plane, resulting in the lower right corner turning up slightly. The panel has a check or crack 17.7 cm long that runs across the surface beginning 12.7 cm up on the right edge. This crack is presumably the reason for the attached pine cradle. The varnish is a yellowed natural resin with a crack network and undissolved strands of resin scattered throughout the surface. The gloss is a bit uneven, with matte sections on the left third of the painting. In ultraviolet light, the moderately fluorescing coating gives the appearance of having been applied very wet while the panel was laid flat and allowed to level and pool as it dried. The

painting may have been restored in Paris in 1938, perhaps indicating the date of the cradling and possibly a cleaning.

The panel is unprimed, with passages of the orange-colored wood left exposed. There are black underdrawing lines, probably executed with thin paint, still visible to the unaided eye in the altered leg positions of the central horse. This suggests that at least a sketchy underdrawing was used for all the animals and figures. Final colors were then applied using a thin application in the horses and a stiffer paint for the costume details. The landscape in most areas was painted after the figures. In infrared reflectography, the head of the horse with the outstretched neck seems to have been shortened, and in normal light, reworking brushwork surrounds its muzzle. In areas where the underlying paint contains orange, there are traction cracks, wrinkling of thin upper glazes, and oozing of the orange pigment up through cracks. The sleeves of the jockeys may have been among the last touches, as the brushwork clearly extends over nearby forms. Although there are no age cracks in the paint, the visible wood surface creates a horizontal pattern in many places, especially where thin applications of dark color have stained the porous grain.

1. The entry in the Durand-Ruel Stock Book is for 10–12 Dec. 1882; see Paris–Ottawa–New York 1988–89, p. 403.
2. Guérin 1945, pp. 78–79. The letter itself is undated, but the Durand-Ruel records note that the picture was sold to Lerolle in January 1883; see Paris–Ottawa–New York, p. 403.
3. The second picture is the pastel *Dancers in Pink* of c. 1878 (L 486). The fact that this work appears in a simple white frame of a type favored and sometimes designed by Degas may suggest that the more conventional frame around *Before the Race* was also approved by the artist.
4. The Walters picture is BR 110. In Washington 1998, p. 124, it is mistakenly stated that this work was sold in 1884, due to a misreading of the Brame and Reff entry; the latter records that it was first acquired by Durand-Ruel, but gives no date for this transaction. The second picture, which is L 679, was sold to Boussod-Valadon on 8 June 1888; see Rewald 1973, p. 89, where it is listed as *Les Courses*. See also Goupil Stock Books, book 12, p. 70, no. 19309.
5. Among studies of this subject are Walker 1933; Reff 1976c; Thomson 1987, pp. 93–99; New York–Houston 1993–94, pp. 59–83; and Washington 1998, pp. 16–81.
6. Degas's copies are Georges Petit 1919b, nos. 91a, 91b, and 91c. See note 5 for discussions of their significance, including the presence of a retreating mounted figure in Gozzoli's fresco *Attendants of the Patriarch Joseph of Constantinople* and an advancing rider in *Procession of Magus Gaspar*.
7. Washington 1998, p. 125. The "procession" of dancers across the canvas was a standard feature of Degas's frieze-like ballet-class paintings, such as cat. 114, which are the same size as a comparable series of racecourse works.
8. Washington 1998, pp. 16, 38–43.
9. RW vol. 1, 184.
10. Guérin 1945, p. 120.
11. Degas's long-standing friends the Valpinçons lived at Ménil-Hubert, close to the French national stud at Haras-du-Pin. The artist occasionally made drawings and other works there, and wrote numerous letters: vacations at Ménil-Hubert during these years are recorded in Guérin 1945, pp. 46–47, 83–94, and 117. Several equestrian pictures may be based on the nearby racetrack at Argentan, a number of them showing a village and church on the brow of a gently sloping hill; see, for example, L 387 and 461.
12. Georges Petit 1919a, p. 74, no. 94 (ii).
13. In addition to his sketches after Gozzoli (see note 6), the retreating horse and rider are similar to Degas's *Huntsman Blowing His Horn* (c. 1865–70; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond), a drawing after Carle Vernet's *Deer Hunt on Saint-Hubert's Day in 1818* (by 1827; Musée du Louvre, Paris). See Washington 1998, pp. 72–73.
14. Washington 1998, p. 124: the study is Georges Petit 1919a, p. 154, no. 178 (ii). The ex-Whitney painting was executed in oil on paper and may thus have evolved from another drawing. This also sets it apart from the two other works, which are on panels of almost identical size.
15. Vollard 1937, p. 56.
16. Thiébaud-Sisson 1931, p. 3; translation from Kendall 1987, pp. 245–46.
17. Rewald 1944, no. 3. Partial resemblance can also be detected in Rewald 1944, nos. 2, 4, 10, and 12.
18. There are two invoices from Durand-Ruel to Clark that list this painting, one dated 22 Nov. 1938, the other dated 26 June 1939 and annotated "received payment." The date "6 or 15 June 1939" is cited in Paris–Ottawa–New York 1988–89, p. 403, and is presumably based on information from the Durand-Ruel Archives.