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Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

By

Roberta Crisci-Richardson

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INTRODUCTION

"Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu…" : the Myth of the Artist

Edgar Degas said "Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu…" and indeed Degas is a famous artist, while remaining, if not unknown, then, certainly misunderstood.[1] We should know everything about Degas because of Henri Loyrette's meticulous biography (1991), a crucial, monumental work that assembles all the extant documents on the life of Degas. But not enough light has been thrown on the artist to connect Degas properly to the time and place in which he lived.[2] In the existing research on the artist, the artworks and personal history of Degas still fail to mesh with the social and cultural history of his times. For years Degas has been characterised as a wealthy aristocrat who was a blind follower of Ingres.[3] Although this has been refuted by Degas scholars, namely Theodore Reff and Loyrette, the image of Degas the aristocrat is generally still the preferred one, whether by feminist scholars who profit from inscribing Degas's misogyny in a patriarchal vision of the world, or by independent but reverential scholars who see Degas as enigmatic, and consider his wit and snobbery as key features of his personality. Others regard Degas as beyond comprehension, thereby perpetuating a romantic and un-historic cult of the artist as genius. Degas remains, for some writers, a supreme, haughty artist remote from the time in which he lived, while for others he is the "odd man out," as one writer has labeled him.[4] One reason for this wrong-headed picture of Degas is that the artist and the man have often either disappeared behind the erudition of the authors, in whose works the documentary approach overrides any attempt at interpretation of the life and works of the artist, or have been obscured by feminist reconstructions, which stress the perceived misogyny of the artist at the expense of a more contextualised analysis. [5] This study, which is motivated by dissatisfaction with the failure to evaluate the life and art of Degas together as a historical phenomenon, aims to bring the individual Degas back into focus, in order to demonstrate that he was neither an aristocrat nor the odd man out, but a bohemian living a socially mobile existence in nineteenth-century Paris, and whose

life and works are bound together in the artist's self-fashioning enterprise and conquest of urban space.

The inadequacy of much present research on Degas is largely due to the perpetuation of a mythical narrative constructed by such critics of the turn of the century as Gustave Geffroy, Camille Mauclair, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and by early biographers, such as Paul-André Lemoisne and Marcel Guérin. This mythical narrative has been left essentially unchanged by later biographers. This situation is an instance of what American art historian Catherine Soussloff has defined in *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept* as "the naturalization of the cultural construction" or "mythic cultural figure": "the artist." For Soussloff, the mythologising of the artist has had consequences for the practice of the discipline of art history ever since its beginnings with Giorgio Vasari because "disciplinary taboos follow upon the heels of mythic cultural figures and, like other social taboos, result in suppression and repression." As Soussloff writes:

> The naturalization of the cultural construction "artist" has produced two interrelated results for the interpretation of art history. First, there has been a lack of scrutiny of "naturalized" source materials, that is the biographies of the artist; and second, the character types that are represented in and result from this literature have been naturalized in interpretation.[6]

An example of the "suppression and repression" in accounts of the life of Degas will be given below. This study presents a biography of the artist that takes into account the existing primary sources of information on Degas and his family, also reviewed below in this introduction. An example will be given here of my mapping Degas according to a biographic and geographic methodology. What the mythical narrative constructed around Degas's life has failed to acknowledge is that, unlike the grand bourgeois Edouard Manet, whose mother could afford to pay for his one-man exhibition in 1867, Degas was almost poor. This fact is important within this reconsideration of Degas, who is described in this study as a bohemian. While Manet wanted and could afford to fight alone his heroic struggle for success, promoting himself as a solitary genius, or "temperament," as Emile Zola called it, it is often forgotten that almost all his life Degas worked within the Parisian rebellious culture of solidarity among artists: not only during the 1860s, when he had to portray friends for free, but at least in the years until 1886, when Degas was one of the chief organisers of the independent exhibitions held since 1874 by the Impressionists on the boulevard des Italiens.[7] While in the literature Manet and Degas are often singled out as high bourgeois, close in class belonging

and urbanity, it is evident that they were two very different kinds of bourgeois. This rewriting of the artist's biography and oeuvre as a whole consists in a biographic and geographic approach that locates and considers the artist in the social locations and geographical places where he lived his life.

At the heart of the argument presented here is how Degas distinguished himself in Parisian society as an artist. He did this by artistic self-fashioning through the appropriation and conquest of a "space" of his own. The first concept, self-fashioning, is adopted from Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (1980), a study of six English writers of the Renaissance, including Thomas More, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare. Greenblatt's idea is that "in sixteenth-century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned." In Greenblatt's definition, the self is "a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires," while the fashioning amalgamates "some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity."[8]

Just as in Renaissance England there were "selves" and "a sense that they could be fashioned" so in the Paris art world of the second half of the nineteenth century, self-fashioning was the latest artist's self-advertising strategy.[9] Another common factor between the writers discussed by Greenblatt and many French artists, including Degas, working in Paris in the nineteenth century, is their social and economic mobility: their bohemianism, as Jerrold Seigel defined it.[10] If Greenblatt's self-fashioned Renaissance writers were "talented middle-class men" who had "moved out of a narrowly circumscribed social sphere and into a realm that brought them in close contact with the powerful and the great," Degas too lived a mobile existence, as sociologically, geographically, and ideologically "displaced" as that of Greenblatt's writers.[11] Proof of Degas's socio-economic mobility is the fact that many writers have called him an aristocrat; others have described him as a grand bourgeois;[12] and yet others have seen him as part of the "industrious and cultivated" bourgeoisie.[13] It was precisely Degas's bohemianism and self-fashioning that allowed such diversity in the evaluations of Degas. The rationale for Degas's self-fashioning is the grounds for one further analogy between nineteenth-century Paris and the Renaissance. As Greenblatt explains, "There are periods in which the relation between intellectuals and power is redefined, in which the old forms have decayed and new forms have yet to be developed."[14] The Parisian art system at the time of Degas, centred on the Salon inherited from the monarchy, was just such an old form in decay, an institution with which the rising number of French artists working in Paris

was deeply dissatisfied. The system could no longer provide them with the space each of them required in order to gain visibility and reputation. The pursuit of space, physically and metaphorically, was the problem, then, and this is the second concept used in this study, that of space. This means at once a physical space of exhibition, and also, metaphorically, a reputation, an audience, a style and themes recognisable as an artist's own. As Richard Shiff has written in his study of Paul Cézanne, the Impressionists "were born into a culture that defined artistic production in terms of creating the original": their attempt to find their own mythical artistic originality and creativity was a real "productive play of finding and making." In this pursuit, they "acted self-consciously," exercising control over their painting, while unable to exercise control over the critical response that it elicited, and its historical durability.[15] Space must be understood therefore as closely related to artistic identity, an identity that is woven in a space and in a social network. This identity was the career goal that gave sense to, defined and informed Degas's life as an artist, his search for a style, themes, and exhibition spaces through effective spatial strategies and personal itineraries that, in defiance of the established rules such as those of the obsolete Salon or the hierarchy of genres, allowed the survival and affirmation of emerging artists in the highly competitive Parisian artistic world. These spatial strategies and itineraries are those the individual devises to resist control and regimentation imposed from above, as theorised in Michel de Certeau's *L'Invention du quotidien* (1980), translated in English as *The Practice of Everyday Life*. As has been written, this book belongs to the post-war French tradition of theories of everydayness or everyday life, established in the critical thought of such historians and thinkers as Fernand Braudel and Henri Lefebvre and put into practice by the militants of Guy Debord's *Situationist International* with the aim to "redress the top-down bias of Foucault's critique of the microtechnologies of power."[16]

As Certeau writes in the introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, "Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others." He asks, what do users do with the rituals, representations, and rules imposed on them and which cannot but be accepted? Certeau is concerned with the "difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization," that is, what he calls *operations* or "ways of operating" that "constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users re-appropriate the space organized by techniques of socio-cultural production." The creativity of groups or individuals already caught in a system can take non-discursive, clandestine forms: "procedures and ruses

of consumers compose the network of an anti-discipline."[17] Among the practices of everyday life by means of which users escape the rules imposed on them by the hegemonic system, Certeau has concentrated

> above all on the uses of space, on the ways of frequenting or dwelling in a place, on the complex processes of the art of cooking, and on the many ways of establishing a kind of reliability within the situations imposed on an individual, that is, of making it possible to live in them by reintroducing into them the plural mobility of goals and desires-an art of manipulating and enjoying.[18]

In Certeau's theory, the practice of everyday life, which is central to this study of Degas, is the "spatial story" or personal itinerary that individuals produce by moving through urban space. These spatial practices, infused as they are with subjective meanings, "secretly structure the determining conditions of social life," Certeau writes.[19] Certeau's spatial story is a concept similar to another concept also taken into consideration in my approach to Degas: Richard Rodger's "mental map." According to Rodger, individuals create their own personal maps of the cities in which they live by including landmarks, routes, and monuments that have personal significance for them and by excluding those aspects of the urban landscape to which they cannot ascribe a meaning.[20] It is this concept, along with the perspective provided by Certeau's theory, that is adopted in my approach to Degas, by mapping him, or pinpointing his self-fashioning enterprise through his conquest of spaces and places. This study considers different instances of Degas's spatial story of self-fashioning through space. In Chapter Two, for example, the years Degas spent in Italy are recalled as a spatial strategy of self-teaching and appropriation of a space/body of knowledge (Italian art) against which Degas would soon define himself by choosing to self-fashion as a Northern neo-baroque painter and emulous of Anthony van Dyck. Places and spaces are real as well as symbolic in Degas: they articulate social and political meanings that Degas used as tools of self-fashioning. In Chapter Four, for instance, the Norman artworks produced by Degas in the 1860s (race-course scenes, seascapes, beach scenes) are seen as the products of the Parisian Anglophile perception of Anglo-Norman cultural heritage. Degas expressed through Normandy, a space at once symbolic and real, his avant-garde endorsement of an artistic and political "Northern-ness" that assimilated broadly French, English, Flemish, and Dutch art, and stood for republicanism and progressive values in an individualistic and nationalistic approach to culture that during the Second Empire was oppositional in nature.[21]

In chapters Five and Six is found another instance of how space and self-fashioning cross in Degas: this is in the self-advertising strategy of offering to execute portraits of acquaintances, and especially of musicians and fellow painters in their own environment, that Degas practised in the 1860s and early 1870s. Space produces self-fashioning: along the urban itineraries forming the web of his own social life, Degas's voluntary portraiture created a gallery of sitters upon whom the painter must rely for recognition. For an artist like Degas, determined to follow his artistic vocation, such spatial stories were a serious matter of self-fashioning, or self-image, because, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, "Few people depend as much as artists and intellectuals do for their self-image upon the image others, and particularly other writers and artists, have of them," since "the quality of a writer, artist, or scientist, which is so difficult to define," exists only "in, and through, co-optation, understood as the circular relations of reciprocal recognition among peers."[22] It was only through the Parisian artistic culture of understanding and mutual support that an artist deprived of means could hope to survive and eventually succeed in the second half of the nineteenth century in Paris.

To return to the quotation at the beginning of this Introduction, Degas is only as illustrious and unknown as he wanted to be and as we let him be. The documentary evidence for some periods of his youth and adult age is scarce, while we know everything about his maturity and old age. Historians tend to use the evidence from more illuminated areas of his life to shed light on the darker ones. The first conclusion one should draw from this consideration is that Degas was for most of his life an unknown, undistinguished, struggling artist in a city replete with artists. Enough sources and knowledge are available to scholars to cease perpetuating the idea of Degas the aristocrat or haughty grand bourgeois and snobbish "odd man out." Degas was unknown, simply because his family was not as relevant or wealthy as Manet's, for instance.

This study proposes a more historical and less mythological view of the life and artworks of Degas, arguing that Degas was a modern bohemian artist hard at work in Paris, where, in their everyday lives, the more unknown and socially mobile artists had more space at their disposal for strategy in the big city, a situation that allowed for vast manoeuvres in the competitive enterprise of self-fashioning and conquest of a place in the art world. Degas was not the classicist painter and narrow-minded bourgeois he is so often made out to be, but a struggling Parisian artist self-fashioning as a Northern neo-baroque painter of small portraits and genre scenes, and who lived a floating existence most of his life in the Paris of the second half of the nineteenth century. That continued until he

became old, known, and revered by fellow painters, followers, and art collectors in the capital of the arts at its most mythical age, the *Belle Époque*.

Primary sources and modern interpretations

What we know of Degas comes from such primary sources as the notebooks and letters of the painter, the Degas family archives, and the accounts of those who knew him personally. Since 1917, the year of his death, friends and acquaintances have left first-hand accounts, monographs, and biographies regarding Degas: Edmond de Goncourt, Paul Valéry, Daniel Halévy, Alice Michel, Walter Sickert, Ambroise Vollard, Marcel Guérin, Paul-André Lemoisne, Paul Lafond, just to mention a few, have left the fundamental texts for the Degas scholar. To this corpus we must add the most relevant scholarly interpretations regarding the artist, sociological readings of the art of Degas (Herbert, Lipton, Armstrong) and such theoretical approaches as feminist (Callen, Pollock, Nochlin) and Marxist art history (Clark).

Primary sources

The first group of primary material examined here includes sources such as the notebooks, sketchbooks and letters of the artist. Degas kept notebooks from around 1853 until 1886, filled sketchbooks with drawings, and wrote numerous letters, some of which have survived and have been published by Marcel Guérin. These documents are a precious resource, because they record, almost uninterruptedly, the artist's readings, addresses, contacts, observations, journeys, thoughts, expenses, and details relating to his projects or work in progress. In 1920, René Degas, the younger brother of the artist, donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France the notebooks found at the death of Degas in his studio. In April 1921, Paul-André Lemoisne, a librarian at the Cabinet des Estampes, published an article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* about "Ces albums, simple cahiers d'étudiant ou carnets de poche dans lesquels il notait ses impressions à l'aide de croquis ou de quelques phrases brèves." As Lemoisne noted, the notebooks are not systematically dated, and one should not expect an ordered diary but a "simple instrument de travail" to which Degas confided whatever he thought important at any given moment, and where, among "croquis de paysages ou de types entrevus, souvenirs de chefs-d'œuvres admirés au passage, notes de voyage, recettes ou procédés etc., trouvons-nous pêle-mêle des renseignements." But then,

for Lemoisne, who had the cult of Degas, every scrap of information on Degas participated in the artist's genius and deserved attention: "de la part d'un artiste comme Degas rien ne saurait nous être indifférent."[23] These notebooks and sketchbooks are, as Reff wrote in the introduction to his 1976 catalogue of them, "objects of a purely practical and private significance, intimately related to his interests and activities of the moment."[24] They contain nothing revelatory about Degas or his art and their extraordinary importance consists in their being records of Degas's daily life. The same is true of the letters of Degas, of which the earliest date from 1871 and the latest from 1910. They are addressed to friends, colleagues, and art dealers and reveal his fondness of friends and family, and his support of fellow painters. They also reveal his tastes in matters of art, his role in the organisation of the independent exhibitions of the *Société Anonyme*, his continuous requests for money from his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in particular, his bouts of depression in old age, and his cursing of the artistic vocation. Marcel Guérin published some of Degas's correspondence in 1947.

Parts of the Degas family correspondence are conserved in Naples, in Paris, and in the USA. These sources are essential to our knowledge of the Degas family, their cosmopolitan background, and other details that contribute to a thorough and objective reconstruction of Degas's life. It is the correspondence exchanged in 1860-61 between Degas and his aunt Laure Bellelli in Italy, for instance, that tells us that early enough Degas was well aware of the deeply troubled financial situation of his father, and this makes it impossible for Degas to sustain the status of a grand bourgeois. Through the correspondence between Degas and his father Auguste, of which only the latter's letters remain, we are able to reconstruct Degas's Italian tour not as an itinerary in pursuit of the Primitives, the Florentine masters of pure drawing, as so many writers claim, and as his father would have wished, but as Degas's own self-learning itinerary in search of the Venetian colourists and Van Dyck's Genoese portraits. From these letters we also learn that the Degas family read the *Magasin Pittoresque*, a popular illustrated magazine with articles on art, architecture, and other topics of general interest. Indeed, if the Degas family took much of what they knew from the *Magasin Pittoresque*, as it appears, it is time to revise the claims that they were, undoubtedly, a culturally sophisticated family: in fact, they pursued the same general interests common to many other *bourgeois* families in modern Paris.

Within the group of primary sources we also find the accounts of Ellen Andrée and Alice Michel, two models who worked for Degas, as well as those of journalists, poets, artists, and friends of Degas who wrote within

living memory of the artist. Among them one finds Daniel Halévy, Paul Valéry, Edmond de Goncourt, Jacques-Emile Blanche, Ernest Rouart, Manet, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Renoir, Odilon Redon, Camille Pissarro, Mary Cassatt, Lemoisne, Georges Jeanniot, Guérin, and the art dealers Ambroise Vollard and René Gimpel. These first-hand accounts describe Degas's personality and record his sayings, his judgments, and opinions. Most of these writings began to appear after the painter's death in September 1917, while others date from the lifetime of the painter, for example Goncourt's journal entry on Degas of February 1874, the letters of Valéry, and those of Gauguin to their friends, or the letters of Van Gogh to his brother Theo and others.

These first-hand accounts often evoke a difficult persona, but they all clearly affirm a dual image of Degas. One is the image of the artist as a harsh, bitter, and solitary man who refused to let unexpected journalists in his studio. The other is the image of a man loyal to his friends, a witty guest at their dinners and country houses, and an artist always ready to acknowledge and praise the talent of struggling or emerging artists (Gauguin, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec). Degas had his tastes, preferences, and idiosyncrasies, a long list of which was given by Vollard, who, however, also pointed out that these "didn't fool anyone."[25] They only strengthened his "reputation of being an eccentric and a tyrant in the opinion of certain people," those people who found it natural to impose on an old man the obligation of visiting exhibitions, eating dishes with flour-based sauces, and sitting at tables full of flowers, just because such is done in the *grand monde*. It is important to remark that Vollard described Degas as a man with strong opinions, but also reminded the reader that the Degas he was evoking was an old man, in a frail state of being, physical and intellectual, upon whom some fashionable circles put unreasonable social expectations. Indeed, most of the memories we have of Degas were passed on by people acquainted with him during his old age, when he was not a very lively presence.[26] Daniel Halévy hinted at a different reality behind the popular myth of Degas as a tyrant.[27] In his introduction to the volume of letters by Degas, edited and published in 1947 by Guérin, Halévy warned that

> A certain picture of Degas exists, almost legendary, mythical; it is the artist as a recluse, voluntarily leading a churlish life, warding off with his rapid and trenchant replies the indiscretions of the world and of people, even contact with them.[28]

For Halévy, this was the picture of Degas known to those who "did not know him at all," "a mask" applied to hide the very different and secret

life of a man with many friends.[29] It is worth noting that Halévy wrote this even though the decades of friendship between his family and Degas were sadly ended by the artist's anti-Dreyfusardism.

Another proof of the awareness of the existence of a double image of the painter can be found in Gauguin's correspondence. Gauguin took part in the fifth Impressionist exhibition in 1880, and around that time met Degas. They appreciated each other's work. Degas had humane qualities in Gauguin's eyes, as he wrote to his friend Georges Daniel de Monfreid from Tahiti in August 1898:

> I am very happy you have gotten to know Degas, and that while trying to help me you were able to make a connection that may be useful to you. Ah, yes! Degas has the name of being harsh and bitter. (I, too, says Z---).
>
> But it is not so for those whom Degas holds worthy of his attention and esteem. He has a fine heart and is intelligent. I am not surprised that he finds you talented and congenial. (…)
>
> Degas, both as to conduct as to talent, is a rare example of all that an artist should be; though he has had as admirers all who are in power-Bonnat, Puvis and Antonin Proust-he has never asked for anything. From him one has never seen nor heard of a mean action, an indelicacy, or anything ugly. Art and dignity![30]

And in the following letter to André Fontainas of March 1899, written from Tahiti, Gauguin was proud of the high opinion Degas had of him and of his art:

> At my exhibition at Durand-Ruel's a young man asked Degas to explain my pictures, as he did not understand them. Degas smiled and told him one of La Fontaine's fables- "Don't you see", he said,-"Gauguin is the lean wolf without a collar."[31]

By defining him as a "lean wolf without a collar" Degas openly acknowledged and praised Gauguin's originality and freedom, his being an artist without master. This episode speaks in favour of Degas's open-minded views and of his anarchism, too, and not of a narrow bourgeois or aristocratic mentality. Vollard, Gauguin, and Halévy all affirmed that there was a hidden Degas (not a truer Degas), known to friends and to those who did business with him, like Vollard, or enjoyed his company in the evenings after a day of work. The other Degas, no less real, was the Degas perceived by those who had to deal with him publicly and superficially, journalists for instance, whom he ill-treated or sent away. What transpires here is not just Degas's self-fashioning, but his disenchantment with the ideology and corrupted politics, press and internal affairs of the Third Republic. An instance of this distrust of the public and official spheres is

Degas's abandonment of his project of a personal private museum. When in 1903 Degas visited the newly opened Musée Gustave Moreau, he found it bombastic and intoxicatingly self-appreciative. According to Valéry, he said: "C'est vraiment sinistre, on se croirait dans un hypogée…Toutes ces toiles réunîtes me font l'effet d'un *Thesaurus*, d'un *Gradus ad Parnassum.*"[32] Other artists and visitors criticised the arrangement and the quality of the artworks in the Musée Moreau.[33] In fact, unlike what other writers imply, Degas's bad impression of the Musée Moreau had nothing to do with a supposedly mean opinion of Degas about Moreau the man or the artist. Degas, like many others, disliked the way in which the authorities had rearranged the place in deliberate disregard of the artist's will. The possibility of such ill-treatment of the identity and individuality of the artist on the part of the State seemed to him so bad that it made him change his mind about the project for his *maison d'artiste*.[34] The aged Degas's attitude of political disillusionment was largely shared among artists and intellectuals in the *fin-de-siècle* anarchist culture of the magazines and *cabarets artistiques* of Montmartre. His choleric dislike of officialdom as seen in his ill-treatment of journalists and refusal to exhibit artworks at the Paris Universal Exhibitions, his traditionalist attitudes, his anti-Dreyfusardism and anti-Protestantism, all characterise him as an anarchist, like Pissarro, Mallarmé, Seurat and others. Degas's intolerance of journalists, technocrats, and intellectuals, his hate of ideological modernity and his attachment to "mon rocher de Pigalle," which he also called "my dunghill," are marks of anarchism.[35] Parisian anarchist ideals are instanced also in the engagement of Degas in what Alexander Varias calls "mutuality" and "communal associations" and certainly in his "tendency toward intimate association," all of which were "the revolutionary tools enabling the Parisian people to rebel during the French revolution, the 1848 revolution, and the Commune." More importantly, a certain Parisian-ness of Degas at work in his embrace of the feminine, and in his experimentalism, can be seen as reflecting the anarchist's "mystique of the refined craftsmanship of the artisan."[36] Degas's works and behaviour of the 1880s, 1890s and later, materialise the mores and atmosphere of the anarchist enclave of Montmartre, an instance of Parisian-ness that was "seditious in more than just a political sense," and the attitudes of Bohemians and avant-garde artists who favoured "non-political channels" and "eccentric individual ways" to shock the bourgeois.[37]

Finally, the reputation of Degas as an anti-Semite should be tackled and considered historically together with his anti-Protestantism. Degas's anti-Semitism cannot be dismissed on grounds that he was merely a child of his times. Considered superficially, as aspects of his traditionalism and

patriotism, Degas's anti-Semitism and anti-Protestantism only add to the figure of the artist as "odd man out" or aristocrat, real or metaphorical. While he was not racist, Degas's anti-Semitism is not just an irritating symptom of prejudice and chauvinism. It should also be seen as instructive of his being bourgeois and non-bourgeois, an inexcusable symptom of the life-long struggle for money and radicalism of his uncertain social position. As Stephen Wilson has argued, French anti-Semitism and anti-Protestantism of the 1880s and 1890s were distinctively economic in emphasis.[38] Both Degas and his art dealer Durand-Ruel voiced their anti-Semitism, but it is worth considering how they were both affected by the crash of the Union Générale Bank in 1882, which, according to Wilson, "deserves something of the status of a founding event" for those phenomena, spreading anti-Semitism as an association "of the Jews with the mysteries of high finance." The event was "widely interpreted in the press as the result of deliberate action against the Catholic finance house by its Jewish rivals, led by Rothschild" and "directly affected many small savers and indirectly worried many more."[39] For the fifty-two-year-old Degas the crash of the Union Générale, which crippled financially his art dealer Durand-Ruel, led to more years of struggle for money. Equally strong was Degas's anti-Protestantism. This has received little attention, but it is crucial to note that Degas perceived Protestants too as a threat to his rather simple ideas of French identity. Like Jews and Freethinkers, Protestants were the targets of political rhetoric, widely spread both from the Left and the Right, that lumped them as a foreign menace to French identity and body politic.[40]

To return to Degas's reputation, at some point the choleric image of the rather petty bourgeois Degas was taken out of this complex socio-political context and the image of an aristocratic Degas began to prevail in art-historical accounts. Why has this idea been uncritically accepted? The simple explanation is that the notion fitted well with his apparently difficult art, which was read as technically complex, "masterly," instead of being read for what it in fact is: experimental art, art often technically unclear in its aims. The complex image of Degas has been used by a few critics and art historians to justify his art, which they saw as difficult, though they recognised his genius. The tendency to regard Degas as an original turned into the notion of the inaccessibility and elusiveness of the artist and his art. The difficulty encountered in attempts to find a meaning in Degas's obsessive images became a complacent accusation of the illogical and irascible behaviour of the man, a statement about the unattainable status and genius of the artist.

Modern interpretations

Taken as a whole, the secondary material is characterised by a divergence between the discourse suggested by Degas's artworks and that suggested by his life, a consequence of the "lack of scrutiny" of the biography of the artist that Soussloff denounces as the effect of the naturalisation of the cultural construction "artist." Some writers have created a narrative encompassing both the biographical facts and the artworks of Degas, but somehow the two notions do not illuminate each other, as if the artworks were mere facts in the life of Degas and yet nothing but objects with a life of their own, untainted by Degas's ideas and in whose creation Degas found no satisfaction but the purely physical pleasure of art-making.[41] In these accounts, critical concepts of scholarship such as self-fashioning, bohemianism, and modern forms of artistic sociability do not enter.

Other writers overlook Degas as a human being and approach his works from the point of view of their experimentalism in matters of techniques and styles. The most detailed study of the artist's complex surfaces and manner of handling his media is the catalogue of the exhibition *Art in the Making: Degas*, held at the National Gallery of London in 2004-5.The complicated effects and technical experiments in Degas's art have always fascinated scholars because of the supposed difficulty in understanding precisely how he manipulated his materials. He engaged with numerous drawing and painting techniques and used wax modelling, and at times photography, as a support to better understand the movements of his figures. We learn from the catalogue that he was convinced of the necessity to draw and redraw the same subject and could not resist the temptation to retouch his works over the years. The art of Degas is seen as both masterly and experimental. While his technical experimentalism is clearly characterised by a certain unevenness, in criticism this very experimentalism has often been constructed in ways that round it up with meanings of mastery and fluency in difficulty and complexity.[42] Degas was also an art collector, who could equally appreciate works of Ingres, Delacroix, Daumier, Manet and works of younger artists such as Seurat, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. Anthea Callen's *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making of Modernity* (2000) also emphasises the working materials and procedures of the avant-garde, and the often shocked response of contemporary critics. She identifies the new easiness of the technique with the idea of modernity found in the apparent easiness and rapidity of the painting processes, equated to the nonchalance of the *flâneur*.

In the Marxist history of art, T. J. Clark has argued in *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985) that the avant-garde painters of the 1860s were expressing the sense of loss, the sense of dislocation, and the uncertainty of social life created by the demolitions and consequent reconstruction of Paris as a bourgeois city, as envisioned by Haussmann. The painters expressed their negative view of Haussmannian Paris through their adoption of the aesthetics of the unfixed and the unfinished in painting, technical choices which, in Clark's view, reflected modernity as uncertainty and ambiguity. According to Clark the avant-garde artists did not simply accept the boulevards as charming, but looked at those who did find them charming. Manet's *Olympia*, for Clark the founding monument of modern art, was the ideal image to represent the new society of spectacle, but its contemporary critics could not have seen this meaning: they saw only the indeterminacy of the painting, the unclean and rubber-like flesh of Olympia, or, in the case of *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, its unreadability. Comparing the critical reception of Manet's *Olympia* at the Salon of 1865 to that of Degas's *Femmes devant un café*, shown in 1877 at the third Impressionist exhibition, Clark writes that critics were not as shocked with Degas as they had been with *Olympia*, because in their eyes the satirical note in Degas rendered his work more trivial. Clark has found in the art of Degas art an attempt to neutralise dangerous issues through satire, caricature, and physiognomy. In Clark's view, for Degas, the modern city would produce "characters;" it would therefore be subject to "sharp, ironical notation and equally fine physiognomic encoding." For Clark, the project did not work: Degas was defeated by "the resistance of modern life to physiognomic reading," just as modernist painting failed in its attempt to "find a way to picture class adequately and devise an iconography of modern life."[43]

Another important text within the sociological field is Robert Herbert's *Impressionism. Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (1988), which provides a general introduction to the study of Paris as the setting for Impressionist modernity, and of the figure of the artist/*flâneur*. For Herbert, the position of Impressionism as the foundation of modern art is allied to the significance in early modern culture of cafés, outdoor concerts, theatre, vaudevilles, dance, picnics, suburban outings, seashore vacations and so on. Herbert's use of social history and biography as aids to interpretation is a fruitful methodology, but his conclusion about Degas is that he was "so much the lone wolf" that he deviated from the more typical type of *flâneur*, epitomised by Manet and his exquisite manners, *savoir-faire*, and dedication to shocking the bourgeoisie. According to Herbert, Degas "associated with the wealthy and privileged among whom he was born"

but was "embittered by the decline of his family's business enterprises," and used art to reveal "the anxieties and the tensions of his contemporaries with surgical cruelty."[44]

Within the secondary literature on Degas, feminist interpretation has been preeminent. Degas's depictions of dancers, laundresses, milliners and bathers have been placed in the context of nineteenth-century patriarchal attitudes that rendered women as inferior beings devoid of any subjectivity, an object of the male gaze serving a merely erotic purpose. In this view, women in the nineteenth century, whether naked or dressed, had one main function: to represent their own condition of marginality under the eye of the all-powerful man. Degas's painting is just another example of this patriarchal attitude of ownership and victimisation-consumption of women. Feminist art historians who have studied Degas in this light include Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Norma Broude, and Callen.

One feminist writer who has offered an original view of Degas is Eunice Lipton, in *Looking into Degas. Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* of 1986. She has interpreted Degas's realist paintings of racetracks and dance as the result of the painter's choice "to paint social events of past grandeur," the decaying leisure realms of horseracing and ballet, and to depict the intrinsic character of change, discontinuity, and alienation in modernity. Degas's dancers, laundresses, and milliners at work and women at their bath, for Lipton do not necessarily show low morality and covert prostitution. In her interpretation, the painter formally adheres to the nineteenth-century classicising style, but in such a way as to convey a provocative social meaning of movement, struggle, and anxiety- and not the conservative content of "morality, nationalism, and a nostalgia for an idealized past." In this reading, Degas's aim is one of subversion: women are not seen as frivolous and charming, but as ugly and immoral, and the male figures are not seen as authoritarian, but are caricatured and marginalised. In Lipton's analysis, Degas's work showed two sides: "what Degas and many of his contemporaries longed to hold onto, the past and privilege, and what they had no control over, the present and change." Work is, for Lipton, the issue in these paintings, because they daringly depict not just workers, but working women, which "was to go straight to the heart of social agitation, exactly where ideologies about the working class and sexuality intersected." From her observation that Degas dignified these workers, not unlike the way Balzac did, and from the consideration that either Degas had profound empathy for skilled work, being a craftsman himself, or that his own sexual inhibitions were the root of his "uncommonly and humanizing vision" of women at work, Lipton drew her conclusion that Degas was experiencing "his own ambiguous position in

society" and "an inability to define oneself socially."[45] Lipton believes that Degas was torn between the rise of new social classes and the loss of power and authority of his whole social class. Lipton wrongly assumes, like most writers, that Degas belonged to the more powerful and authoritarian social strata, but her sense of Degas's social instability and of his empathic attitude towards working women is right.

Other writers who have analysed Degas's artworks have found that their modernity, experimentalism, and avant-gardism are at odds with Degas the narrow-minded, racist bourgeois that he was. It is as if historians of Degas had agreed that the man and the painter, the life and the works were not a single story, which indeed they must be. In that group of writers, Armstrong finds that, among the modern masters, Degas is a phenomenon apart, as illustrated in the title of her book, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (1991). Faced with "the contradiction that arises in confrontation with Degas," Armstrong locates the nature of such contradiction in the presence of "the following pair of terms: realism and repetition, or, otherwise described, storytelling and seriality," or "history" and "modern life." Armstrong's view of Realism as documentary evidence cannot accommodate Degas's realism, and to confront the difficulty she encounters, Armstrong uses various approaches (socioeconomics, semiotics, literary criticism, and psychology) depending on the explanation the images call for. No other approach or account would suit "Degas's double project of tradition-recuperation and -disintegration" but this "oscillation between positivist and deconstructivist points of view."[46] But the nature of Degas's realism was not documentary: he never painted real spaces, as Goncourt knew, only realistic ones. It was a Northern type of realism: the realism of the Dutch painters of the Golden Age, who painted *nae't leven* (from memory) or *uyt de gheest* (from memory mixed with fantasy). Armstrong also intuits a pattern of group engagements on the part of the artist: with the Impressionists, with the members of his own family involved in commerce, with the circle of bankers/art patrons referred to in the *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* of 1878, and with the circle of Opera-goers uniting around the librettists Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac. Armstrong does not see in Degas's social circles the question of modern sociability and mutual support that modern painters had to engage with in order to be able to pursue an artistic career in a competitive environment like Paris. She sees in Degas's sociability a confirmation of his supposed concerns for his assumedly privileged social status. For her, Degas is concerned with work and with workers' relation to their work as well as with the issue of professionalism being nothing but a form of prostitution

for which aestheticism is merely a cover.[47] This, for Armstrong, corresponds to Degas's personal search for his own position in the world, reflected in his ambivalent attitude, torn between his wish to be an artist above any form of commerce and his actual need to sell his works after the death of his father in 1874 and the collapse of the family wealth. But, as this study shows, the evidence is that Degas had always known that there was no family wealth to speak of and that the status of painter, in his case, would only come to him as a hard-earned position. In a case of unchecked biographical sources, the writer has accepted the mythological version of the wealthy Degas, who did not need to paint to survive, and was part of, and painted for, "Halévy's society, composed of aristophile snobs, *bouffes-parisiens* and *opéra-comique* initiates, and *La Vie Parisienne* writers." For them, believes Armstrong, Degas painted, as in the case of the café-concert pictures,

> the lowlife negative of their own high society, and a place for slumming, whose spectacle could be viewed with a fascinated disdain that confirmed its otherness and its viewers' detachment from it, not to mention the observing class's dependence on the performing class's low society for contrast.[48]

Historian Philip Nord has analysed Degas and the other Impressionists in the light of their purely political ideas, proposing that what really united these painters was their political faith, republicanism. Until divergences became explicit at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, republicanism and new painting were one cause. When it comes to discussing Degas's republicanism, Nord unfortunately presents another case of unsubstantiated biography, along the lines of what Soussloff has described. For Nord, Manet's attachment to republicanism was sincere, Renoir's was "opportunistic" and Degas's was "transient." But Nord cannot easily reconcile the old clichés gleaned from other writers about the wealth and high-bourgeois status of Degas with his own and correct perception of Degas as a "young man of prickly independence," and "of tolerant and progressive views." He concludes by stating that Degas was as much a republican as a patriot.[49]

The issue of Degas's misanthropic persona has been such a preoccupation in scholarly literature that in 1996 Kendall set to redress the situation. This he did in his curatorial work for *Degas: beyond Impressionism*, at the National Gallery of London, an exhibition focusing on the last thirty years of Degas's career.[50] Kendall has shown that the reclusive and cantankerous behaviour of the painter are myths generated by Degas himself, directly and indirectly, through his rejection of people

whom he did not wish to get involved with, journalists for example, or friends fallen out of favour, or anyone who, not knowing his habits, dared to disturb him while at work. For the rest, Kendall has written, Degas was a kind person to models and children, and as sociable as he had always been: keeping up his correspondence, attending dinners and exhibitions, meeting friends old and new, young poets and artists, taking pictures, travelling abroad for business or pleasure. He took direct and professional care of exhibitions and sales of his work. The book brings to light Degas's self-awareness of his public and private sides. It is clear that Degas could manipulate these two spheres, thereby moulding his reputation for the future.[51] Nevertheless, this portrait of Degas, in its attempt to demonstrate that the old Degas was not a misanthrope, but a good man, is another instance of "the situation of the textually 'lost' artist," to borrow Soussloff's expression.[52]

The aim of this study is to retrieve a lost artist, to write a more substantial and less mythological biography of Degas including a more accurate account of his works-hence the mapping, within a geographic approach. To find Degas, we must first locate his hiding spot, so to say. Therefore, an important premiss of my argument is Degas's art-historical consciousness: Degas's disguise, explicit, for instance, in his self-fashioning in emulation of Anthony van Dyck or Gustave Courbet. Soussloff's book *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept* was essential to understanding that the genre of the artist's biography, upon which the art-historical discipline is built, is anecdotal by definition.[53] If art history has to be history, it must start with a historically valid and reliable biography of the artist, which locates (or "maps") the artist in history, that is, in a precise space and time with its unique set of issues and motivations. Unless this is done, the artist is not there. Through a genealogical approach which takes "the concept of the artist to be central to the practice of an art history that has traditionally been driven by concerns with attribution and the delineation of individual and period styles," Soussloff sets out to locate "the artist in the discourse of history" and attempts a new historiography for art history, "in order to bring the relevance of history, in all of its discourses, into alignment with a variety of theoretical methods that have been employed since 1978 to interpret texts." As Soussloff argues, "the appearance in history writing of the concept of the artist should logically lead to historiographical writing (the writing about history) where the historian has traditionally been most aware of how cultural and philosophical concepts operate in texts, that is, discursively." However, as Soussloff remarks, what motivated her study was precisely "the obvious lack of critical discussion about the concept of