



Degas at the Opera

Musée d'Orsay, level 0

Main exhibition area

24 September 2019 – 19 January 2020

This exhibition is organised by the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, as well as the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, for the Paris Opera's three-hundred and fiftieth anniversary. The exhibition is coordinated with special assistance from the Bibliothèque nationale de France's national library).

Throughout his entire career, from his debut in the 1860s up to his final works after 1900, the Opera formed the focal point of Degas' output. It was his "own room", to borrow the expression used by his friend Mallarmé. He explored the venue's different spaces (auditorium and stage, boxes, foyer and dance studios) and followed those who frequented them: dancers (on stage, resting or practising), singers, orchestral musicians, audience members, and black-attired, subscribed regulars in the wings. While other subjects that the artist tackled featured only sporadically (including portraits, landscapes, milliners, ironers, and scenes from horse races, brothels and cabaret cafés), the opera reappeared continually. This hermetic world—with only rare escapes through its veiled or blinding dance-studio windows—was a microcosm of infinite possibilities that provided ground for any experiments: countless perspectives that inspired uncommon framing (bird's eye views or *di sotto in sù*), contrasts in lighting, examinations of movement and sincerity of motions with apparent spontaneity that hid constant training and patient study, unusual groupings of bodies producing those "beautiful clusters" he liked so much ... everything this universe "of distance and embellishment" had to offer. The opera was also a laboratory conducive to technical innovation: it was with Ludovic Lepic, an habitué of the opera (for which he created costumes), and on the theme of the ballet master that Degas produced, in 1876-1877, his first monotype, in 1881: *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* [The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer], a wax sculpture supplemented with real accessories that revolutionised sculpture. Since the major retrospective in 1988 (Paris, New York and Ottawa), which marked a revival of interest in Degas, several exhibitions have focussed on the 'painter of dancers' (especially *Degas and the Dance*, in Detroit and Philadelphia in 2003, and *Degas and the Ballet: Picturing Movement*, in London in 2011). However, none have been dedicated to the opera comprehensively, studying both the passionate bond Degas kept with this house ("missing the opera is a real source of suffering", he wrote after only a few weeks in New Orleans), his musical tastes (his attachment to French grand opera and his aversion to Wagnerism), his personal relations with successive directors, composers (including Auber, Reyer and Chausson), ballet professionals (including Salle, Sanlaville, Van Goethem, Chabot, Biot and Mauri), singers (including Jean-Baptiste Faure and Rose Caron), subscribed regulars (the Halévy milieu) and the infinite resources of this marvellous 'toolbox'. The artist's first sketchbooks, kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, show an early interest in the stage. In 1860, he began—with *Petites filles spartiates provoquant des garçons* [Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys]—a project lasting over twenty years in which youngsters practising in the arid plains of Sparta became prototypes of ballet scenes to come. The depictions *Portrait de Mlle Eugénie Fiocre à propos du ballet de « la Source »* [Portrait of Mlle Fiocre in the Ballet "La Source"] (Brooklyn Museum, New York), exhibited at the 1868 Salon, and *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* [The Orchestra at the Opera] (Musée d'Orsay, circa 1870) definitively introduced—in diverse forms—the opera in Degas' work. From 'precision exercises' at the start of the 1870s to 'thick-stroke' pastels and charcoals in the 1890s and 1900s, Degas used the most varied array of techniques and resources, dividing his works into large-size paintings, 'products' or 'items' for sale, sculptures, illustrations (*La Famille Cardinal*) and ranges, limiting himself to black and white or indulging in 'abundances of colours'. In this way, he explored all nooks and uses, and, between realistic observations and dreamy visions ("I have done so much with these dance examinations without having seen them that I am somewhat ashamed of it", he wrote in around 1880), he built his oeuvre upon the opera.



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*
[The Orchestra at the Opera], circa 1870
Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 46 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay

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Curators:

Henri Loyrette, Chief Curator

Leïla Jarbouai, Curator, Musée d'Orsay

Marine Kisiel, Curator, Musée d'Orsay

Kimberly Jones, Curator, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

The second phase of the exhibition will take place at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, from 1 March to 5 July 2020.

With generous support from



Media partners: Le Figaro – Le Point – Art & Décoration – l'Objet d'art – BFM TV – ARTE – France Musique

Related to the exhibition

Publication

Exhibition catalogue *Degas à l'Opéra* [Degas at the Opera], coordinated by Henri Loyrette. Co-published by the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée de l'Orangerie / Réunion des musées nationaux.

Inaugural conference

Friday 4 October 2019 – 12.00pm: Given by the exhibition curators. Auditorium, tickets to be booked.

Study day

Friday 6 December 2019: *De mémoire d'Opéra. [The Opera Through the Ages]* Auditorium, free upon registration.

Dance

Friday 11 October and Saturday 12 October 2019 – 7.30pm: *Degas Danse* [Degas Dance], an immersive performance created by the ballet of the Opéra national de Paris. By **Auréli Dupont**, director of dance at the Opéra national de Paris and **Nicolas Paul**, a choreographer.

Lunchtime concerts

Every Tuesday, from Tuesday 12 November to Tuesday 17 December 2019 – 12.30pm: Five concerts with Ophélie Gaillard, La Diane Française, the Elias Quartet, Iestyn Davies, Thomas Dunford and Jean Rondeau.

Evening concerts

Wednesday 16 October 2019 – 8.00pm: *Cappella Mediterranea*, led by **Leonardo García Alarcón** with the voices of Jodie Devos, soprano, and Cyril Auvity, tenor. Auditorium

Monday 9 December 2019 – 8.00pm: *The Orchestra of the Opéra national de Paris*, led by **Philippe Jordan**. Nave

Thursday 19 December 2019 – 8.00pm: Harpsichord: Jean Rondeau; Lute: Thomas Dunford. Auditorium

Performance

Saturday 19 October and Saturday 23 November 2019 – 4.00pm: Reading–Performance *Dying on Stage – Chapters I and II*, performed by **Christodoulos Panayiotou**. **Saturday 14 December 2019 – 1.30pm:** Reading–Performance *Dying on Stage – Chapter III*, written and performed by **Christodoulos Panayiotou**.

Cinema and opera

Carte blanche given to Frédéric Mitterrand:

Thursday 7 November 2019 – 8.00pm: *The Magic Flute*, **Thursday 28 November 2019 – 8.00pm:** *The Bartered Bride*, **Thursday 12 December 2019 – 8.00pm:** *Moses and Aaron*, **Thursday 9 January 2020 – 8.00pm:** *Madama Butterfly*

Talks

Thursday 14 November 2019 – 7.00pm: *Sur les traces d'un fantôme : la civilisation de l'opéra* [In the Footsteps of a Phantom: The Civilisation of the Opera], given by **Timothée Picard**

Thursday 5 December 2019 – 7.00pm: *Un singulier revenant : l'opéra dans la culture contemporaine* [A Unique Phantom Reappearing: the Opera in Contemporary Culture], given by **Olivier Py** and **Timothée Picard**

Discovery evening

Thursday 16 January 2020 – 6.30pm to 11.00pm: *Mascarade ! Bal masqué à l'Opéra* [Masquerade! Masked Ball at the Opera]

Guided tours

Exhibition tour: see dates and times at musee-orsay.fr

Trajectoires « d'étoiles » ["Stars" pathway]: Friday 4, 11, 18 and 25 October 2019 – 2.30pm

De l'Opéra au café-conc [From the Opera to the Café-Concert] Friday 8, 15, 22 and 29 November 2019 – 2.30pm

Family visits: *Degas, ce fantôme de l'Opéra. [Degas, a Phantom of the Opera]* From 12 October 2019 to 11 January 2020, Saturdays – 11.00am

Children's workshop: *Des coulisses à la scène [From the Wings to the Stage]* Dates at musee-orsay.fr / **Family weekend:** 9 and 10 November – 2.00pm to 6.00pm

Practical information

Opening hours: Open daily, except Mondays, 9.30am – 6pm, Thursdays until 9.45pm.

Prices / Museum entrance ticket: Full rate: €14 / Concessions: €11 / Free entry for those under 26 years old residing in, or citizens of, a European Union country / Access: Musée d'Orsay, access through the main entrance: 1 Rue de la Légion d'Honneur, 75007 Paris

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