

# Parisian realism artists of the 19th century

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The following body of work focuses upon Realism and the artists, Manet (not to be confused with Monet) and Degas, two Parisian artists of the 1800s who captured the lives of the French people through their paintings. Realism's definition, its three defining characteristics, and its place in the time line of art history will be briefly presented, moving into the similarities and differences, such as mediums used in the artists' works and their subjects of focus, found between Manet and Degas, in regards to their life's passion as artists of the 19th century. Brief summaries of each artist's life will precede comparison of two selected " famous works" to compare and contrast the artists manifested passions for the work each created.

## Realism

Realism is a style of painting which depicts subject matter-form, color, space-as it appears in actuality or ordinary visual experience without distortion or stylization (progressiveart. com). Through realism, subjects are depicted in as straightforward a manner as possible, without idealizing them and without following rules of formal artistic theory (artcyclopedia. com). Little emotional value is depicted, as the painter shows nature and people just the way he or she observes them (horton. ednet).

Realism began to appear on the art scene in the 18th century, following the styles of Romanticism and Neoclassicism; French realism, in particular, was considered the guiding influence on the philosophy of Impressionists (artcyclopedia. com). Manet and Degas were both considered Impressionists as well as Realists, Manet eventually being considered the leader in the Impressionist movement (artchive. com).

## Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

Born in 1834 to a wealthy Parisian family, Degas was considered a shy, insecure, aloof individual; he never married. Due to the family's status, there was never a shortage of funds for his passion of art (artchive. com)[1]. Receiving his training in Louis Lamothe's studio, Degas displayed the intense influence of paintings and frescoes he observed on long trips to Italy; his notebooks are filled with these subjects (metmuseum. com)[2]. He eventually came to "maturity" as a painter in the 1860s, where history painting was considered the most popular art at the time (artchive. com).

Degas varied with mediums and supports, ranging from his classical training of oil painting on canvas to working with pastels on paper. Sometimes he would combine mediums, as evident with his combination of oil and tempera paint on canvas with *Dance School*, dated 1874. His subjects were typically women, especially noted for his observation of ballet in the 1880s, and people's faces, of which he started out with self-portrait work before moving onto Parisians of low class.

\**Dance School*, 1874[3]

This work captures several different activities going on in a dance class. There is the instructor, with whom three students are focused on the instruction being given. A dancer in the left foreground pays attention to the violinist before her, as if waiting for a cue, from the music being played, to either join her classmates directly behind her or perhaps to wander to another part of the room where other students can be found. This appears to be a possibility with another dancer, who stands poised with her head

tilted to the left, listening for the moment to pull her into full stance and move into formation with her fellow classmates.

The young lady directly behind her appears to be distracted, perhaps bored with the routines that are consistently taught, as she places her arms up around her head and looks slightly upward towards the ceiling. A dancer at the window may be also distracted or bored but the observer is unaware due to the nature of her back being turned towards the class. A final dancer stands at the bar, leg extended and appears to be concentrating on her balance and poise, or perhaps preparing herself to join the class after a proper warm up.

Light from outside streams into the classroom, softly touching the floor, reaching out to add a sort of quiet lingering in the room; for all the various activities in the room, one would assume a sort of busy, almost chaotic sense would linger, creating distraction for all dancers, and even perhaps the musician and dance instructor, while in the midst of this setting.

Eduard Manet (1832-1883)

Manet was born in 1832, into the Parisian bourgeoisie. Although well educated, he didn't excel in the academic world; he displayed a passion for the arts at an early age and was encouraged by his mother's brother to pursue this passion. It wasn't until after serving a brief time in the Merchant Marines in 1850 that he took up study with Thomas Couture, of which he stayed with his mentor until 1856. During this time, he displayed preference for the works of Velazquez and Goya but felt that "one's art should reflect ideas and ideals of the present, rather than the past" (artchive. com).

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Manet, much like Degas, focused on the lower class Parisian people, a class unlike the class either one were born into. Manet also had a preference for nude models in his work, of which he displayed in some of his work, the most popular-and controversial work being Olympia, an oil paint on canvas work from 1863. His mainstay for medium preference was oil paint with a canvas support.

\*Olympia, 1863[4]

The painting that caused a stir in 1863, one of which Manet did not intend. The artist didn't consider himself a radical, like Courbet but this work caused controversy just the same (artchive. com). In the painting, there is a woman appearing to be reclining, with a relaxed, non aroused appearance not only found in her expression but can also be seen in her posture. She wears a few simple pieces of jewelry, a flower tucked behind her left ear, and one of her slippers has fallen off of her foot, yet she doesn't seem to pay too much attention. A small black cat, almost hidden in the shadows, arches its back and eyes are wide.

The indentation made by the lady's elbow emphasizes the softness of the pillows she reclines upon, and the floral scarf or shawl she is holding in one hand-with the remainder appearing out from under her lower body, seems to add a touch of color to the otherwise stark, white of the bedding she is resting upon. Emerald curtains, perhaps made of velvet or a similar heavy fabric used with window treatments, hang in the background, one pulled aside just right of the subject's head.

To her left, it appears as if a servant of the house has brought flowers into the room; from a suitor or maybe even from the painter himself-although Manet was newly married at the time of the painting. The servant's expression displays a hint of trying to capture the attention of the reclining woman but to no avail.

### Compare/Contrast

Degas and Manet were working at the same time, and although Degas worked with other mediums and supports, such as pastel on paper, the two artists focused upon the common people of Paris, mainly women. Degas has been more noted for his work with dance classes, Manet for his focus with women, such as the subject in *Olympia*, and the barmaid in *A Bar at Folies-Bergeres*, 1881-82[5]. Natural, relaxed expressions are to be found on the faces of the women who were the subjects of these two Parisian artists, bodies not posed for endless, exhausting hours appear to be more relaxed, giving a sense of "in the moment" with the work displayed, from beginning to completion.

Similarity is found in the ability to allow subjects to "just be," as opposed to awkward posing and unrealistic facial expressions. Difference can be found in the quality of the completed work, focusing on the mediums implemented by each artist. Manet's use of oil on canvas provides a polished, almost photograph-like appearance, almost as if numerous sessions were undertaken to capture the quality of the resulting work. Degas' use of oil and tempera on canvas, sometimes an implementation of pastels and paper,

gives a more “on the spot,” beginning on sight and then moving away to completion upon return to the studio quality to his finished work.

### Summary

Manet and Degas, Parisian artists of the 19th century, men who were noted as Impressionists as well as Realists of their time, captured the images of the people of France, Paris and low class citizens in particular, and brought them to life on canvas for the world to eventually come to view; their works are displayed across the globe, from such places as Shelburne, Vermont to London to Paris. Manifesting real life images, in a more natural state of being, was the center of the work Manet and Degas focused on in the duration of their art careers, influencing fellow and future artists to explore capturing the moment, and bringing the moment to life on the canvas.

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[3] Image can be found at [www.artchive.com](http://www.artchive.com)

[4] Image can be found at [www.artchive.com](http://www.artchive.com)

[5] Image can be found at [www.artchive.com](http://www.artchive.com)