

Edgar Degas's experiments in the painting of plates and colorization of prints revolutionized the art of monotype.

# PAINTERLY PRINTS

By Jerry N. Weiss

## SEE THE SHOW

“Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty” is on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City through July 24.

OPPOSITE: With pastels like *The Singer (Chanteuse de café-concert)* (1875–1880; pastel over monotype in ink on paper, 6¼x4½ plate), which began as monotypes, Degas invented an entirely new vernacular. Traces of the initial ink print can be seen throughout the work.

GIFT, MISS MARTHA ELIZABETH DICK ESTATE; READING PUBLIC MUSEUM, READING, PENN.

*“What an agonizing moment! Let it roll! Let it roll!”*

According to his friend Pierre-Georges Jeannot, it was with those words of anticipation that Edgar Degas prepared to run a freshly painted plate and paper through a press. Painted with ink or oil on metal plates, then transferred to paper, Degas's monotypes are among his most fluid and spontaneous works. He produced more than 300 such prints of subjects that included café performers, the ballet, brothels, bathers and landscapes—in short, the same themes that he studied in pencil, pastels, oils and sculpture. A current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, “Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty,” displays the full range of Degas's monotype subjects and techniques, as well as additional related drawings and paintings.

## MONOTYPE'S GREATEST INNOVATOR

Degas believed he'd invented the monotype process and, though strictly speaking that isn't true, he was its greatest innovator. Before Degas, monotype was a little-known and seldom-practiced art form. Surveys of the medium usually credit Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione as the first major artist to produce monotypes; in the 1640s Castiglione covered a copper plate with black ink, denoted light passages by scratching or wiping ink from the wet surface and printed the resulting images. The

method doesn't appear to have caught on until more than 200 years later when an eccentric amateur, Vicomte Ludovic-Napoléon Lepic, frustrated by his lackluster efforts as an etcher, began using ink and rags, rather than incised lines, in order to create more painterly effects. As luck would have it, Lepic and Degas were friends, and the latter was intrigued by the possibilities of a new approach to printmaking. In the mid-1870s with Lepic acting as technical advisor, Degas created his first monotype, which bears the signatures of both men.

## PULLING AN IMAGE OUT OF INK

In a 1945 publication on Degas's techniques, Denis Rouart devoted a chapter to monotypes, wherein he identified three fundamental approaches that the artist employed, although each was subject to many variations. In the first method Degas inked the entire plate. The print



Deyas

## MONOTYPE OR MONOPRINT?

A monotype is a one-of-a-kind piece of work. The artist creates the design by applying ink, paint or some other medium to a plate. The plate is then pressed onto a sheet of paper or other surface, creating the monotype. Even if a second impression is made, it will be distinct from the first because much of the medium will already have been lifted from the plate.

A monoprint is one of a series of impressions that are basically the same. The artist establishes the design by etching, carving or masking a plate or by creating a relief block. The medium is then applied to the plate or block, which is then pressed onto the print surface. Medium can be reapplied to the plate or block so that nearly identical prints can be made.

Holly Davis



could then be left as a black-and-white image, retouched slightly with pastel after drying, or be completely reworked in full color with pastel. *Three Ballet Dancers (Trois danseuses)*, above, is an early monotype that exemplifies the “subtractive” method: Beginning with an ink-laden plate, Degas used a rag to wipe out passages to achieve a range of lights and middle tones, such as the dancers’ figures, floorboards and stage set at right. Where Degas desired a sharper contour, such as at the edge of a leg or

foot, he implemented a pointed object, perhaps his fingernail. Examined close up, the artist’s fingerprints can be seen throughout the print, a personal residue left in the viscous foundation.

### A TASTE FOR EXPERIMENTATION

In *The Singer (Chanteuse de café-concert)*, page 59, Degas added pastel to embellish the initial print. As in *Three Ballet Dancers* and many of his theatrical subjects, the figure is lit from below, giving her an unnatural glow. The monotype, its tones still

visible to the left and right of the singer, was essentially a preparatory underdrawing for the color work. Pastel allowed Degas to introduce color flashes—auburn for the hair, a pink flower behind the chanteuse’s ear, a blue earring and green foliage—that transformed a print into a richly chromatic work.

More than a few of Degas’s major pastels, like *Woman Drying Herself after the Bath* (page 62), were reconfigurations of monotypes. In these cases, the addition of pastel was



Degas  
à l'œuvre

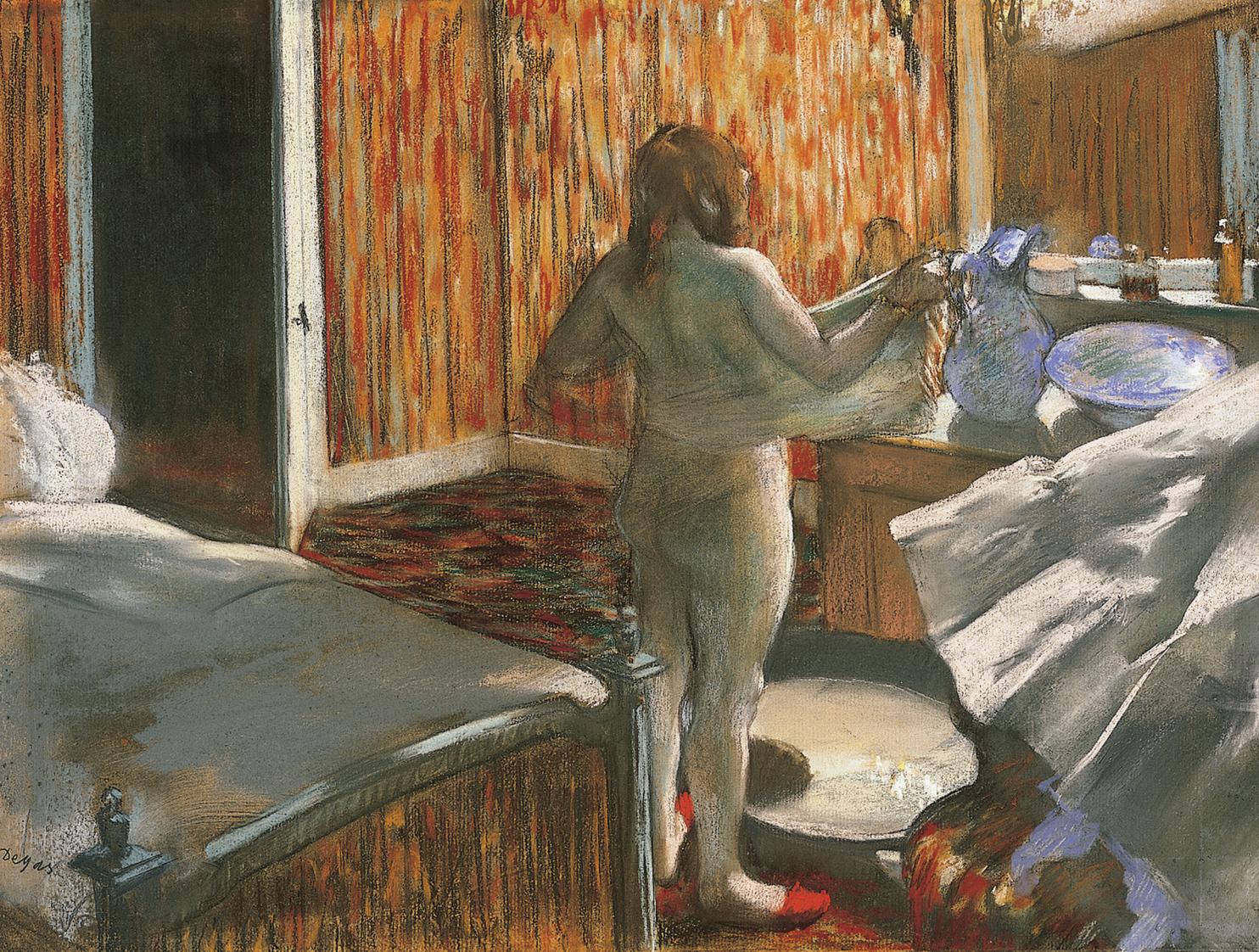
far more than an embellishment, but constituted a substantial transformation of the original print. It would be interesting to know whether Degas had a color version in mind when printing the work in ink, or whether the evolution was spontaneous. Since the paper used for monotypes was probably not the same as an experienced draftsman would choose for pastel, one could surmise that the progression from monotype to color was often impulsive. Then again, Degas once painted a portrait on

mattress ticking when artist's canvas wasn't available, so perhaps quality of material wasn't an obstacle.

Degas's second method was an additive process. For these prints he drew on a fresh plate with a brush dipped in ink, which allowed for a finer control of line. This was the approach he favored, for instance, for a series of about 50 brothel scenes printed in the late 1870s. Although *Bedtime (Le Coucher)*, page 63, appears to have been done very much in the first method, it features a looser and

ABOVE: **Three Ballet Dancers (Trois danseuses)** (1878–80; monotype in ink on cream laid paper,  $7\frac{13}{16} \times 16\frac{3}{8}$  plate) was made in the “dark field” manner, meaning Degas covered a plate with black ink and wiped out areas to produce effects of light and form. He then placed a sheet of paper on top of the wet plate and ran the paper and plate through a press.

STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE,  
WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.



more evocative handling than *Three Ballet Dancers*, and it's possible that Degas alternated between the two approaches, wiping away some parts of the plate and painting back into others.

### THE LATE LANDSCAPES

Degas was the first artist to treat monotype as a serious and independent art form. He then reinvented it by adding pastel and, eventually, used monotype to give free rein to some of his most exploratory visions. It was in the third approach Rouart identified that Degas displayed his most experimental techniques. These works, produced in the early 1890s, took landscapes as their subjects. The theme of landscape is noteworthy, since Degas had expressed a strong antipathy for the plein air painting practiced by his contemporaries. But his landscape monotypes weren't painted from life;

inspired by his travels of 1890, Degas arrived at the Burgundy estate of his friend Jeannot and proceeded to make prints from memory. Having watched Degas formulate the scenes, Jeannot later wrote, "All these things emerged without apparent effort, as if he had the model in front of him." Degas's traveling companion confirmed the accuracy of Degas's visual memory, recognizing places they'd passed in their horse-drawn carriage. The artist himself offered contradictory descriptions of the late monotypes. When asked if their allusiveness offered a window to his "soul," he replied that

they were "a reflection of my eyesight. We painters do not use such pretentious language." Later, however, he described them as "paysages imaginaires"—imaginary landscapes.

The increasingly experimental technique Degas employed, at the behest of his memory, heightened the poignant ambiguity of the landscape monotypes. *Landscape with Rocks* (*Paysage avec rochers*), page 65, is rich in improvisation. The work's lower section began as a monotype of pink oil paint, applied with a brush, upon which multiple colors were then overlaid with smudges and stipples

**Degas believed he'd invented the monotype process and, though strictly speaking that isn't true, he was its greatest innovator.**



LEFT: *Bedtime (Le Coucher)* (1880–85; monotype in ink on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x10 $\frac{7}{8}$  plate) is an evocative print in which Degas probably combined elements of dark and light field methods. For details like those seen at the base of the lit lamp, he scraped into wet ink with a blunt object.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

BOTTOM LEFT: In *Forest in the Mountains (Forêt dans la montagne)* (ca 1890; monotype in oil on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{16}$ x15 $\frac{3}{4}$  plate) Degas applied diluted green oil paint to the lower left corner of the plate. During the printing, the paint smeared to unusual effect.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, N.Y.; LOUISE REINHARDT SMITH BEQUEST

OPPOSITE: The significant addition of pastel greatly altered the monotype *Woman Drying Herself after the Bath* (1876–77; pastel over monotype on paper, 18x23 $\frac{3}{4}$ ).

THE NORTON SIMON FOUNDATION



of pastel. The entire piece shimmers with a gently atmospheric effect, the central rocks gaining definition with jottings of darker pastel.

More surprising in effect is *Forest in the Mountains (Forêt dans la Montagne)*, at left, a print of such abstraction that it used to be called *A Wooded Landscape*; titles of the landscape monotypes are often nearly interchangeable. Richard Kendall, a Degas scholar who co-curated MoMA's exhibition, once described this work's "dramatic silhouette [that] hints at shadowy hedgerows or rocky outcrops." There's such a dramatic bifurcation between foreground and middle distance and, indeed, in the method of transcription Degas used to suggest these different planes, that it's difficult to assign either foliage or a geological structure to the Motherwell-like shape at lower left. Juxtaposed with the subtle gradations of the sky and tree shapes on the right, the liquefied paint that smeared under the pressure of a roller and seeped off the edge of the print resembles nothing so much as



## A FAVORITE THEME

Both *Frieze of Dancers (Danseuses attachant leurs sandales)*, above, and *Two Dancers (Deux danseuses)*, at right, refer to subjects and compositions that fascinated Degas throughout his life and found expression in his drawings, paintings and monotypes.

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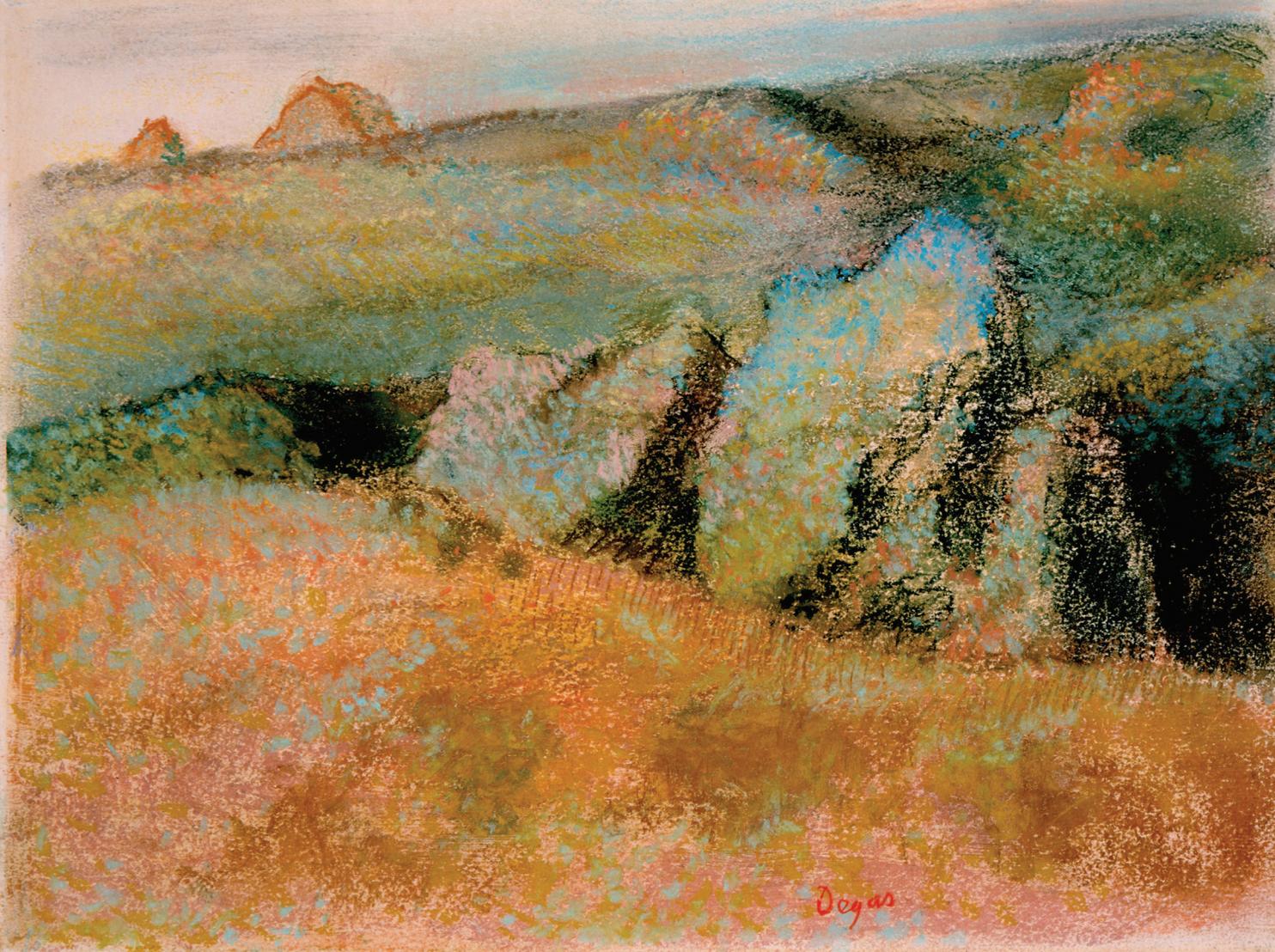
ABOVE: *Frieze of Dancers (Danseuses attachant leurs sandales)* (ca 1895; oil on fabric, 27<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub>x78<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub>)

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART; GIFT OF THE HANNA FUND; © THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

RIGHT: *Two Dancers (Deux danseuses)* (1905; charcoal and pastel on tracing paper mounted on paper, 43x32)

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, N.Y.; THE WILLIAM S. PALEY COLLECTION





20th-century nonobjective painting. That Degas enjoyed these “accidents” seems evident for, as Kendall has noted, similar Rorschach-like blottings continue to turn up throughout the late monotypes.

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ABOVE: Although Degas’s travels through the French countryside inspired his monotypes of the early 1890s, the artist later described these scenes as “imaginary landscapes.” Their dreamlike quality is reminiscent of tonalism; however, the monotypes are never overtly romantic in mood. Even Degas’s blurred images retain his trenchant clarity, as seen in *Landscape with Rocks (Paysage avec rochers)* (1892; pastel over monotype in oil on wove paper, 10½x13¾ sheet).

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA; PURCHASE WITH HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ENHANCEMENT FUND

### A MEETING OF TECHNIQUE AND MOOD

The landscape monotypes, even more than earlier prints like *Bedtime*, enter a profoundly abstracted realm, both in technical and psychological terms. Understandably, much of the literature on Degas’s monotypes focuses on the methods and means of their production, for it’s in these works that Degas appears, in some ways, to be most accessible or, at least, in which he allows greatest access to unpremeditated thought. More than the figures that preceded them, the landscapes of the early 1890s are almost completely free of narrative associations that we project on artwork with the human presence. They may be the first series of landscapes in any medium that capture the impression of a place in passing, much as a view from a moving window is imprinted on the mind’s eye.

The dreamlike feel of the landscape monotypes is unique in Degas’s oeuvre and constitutes an ethereal conclusion to his essays in the medium. Each of these facets—the dance and theater subjects, brothel scenes and bathers—were extensions and elaborations of themes that he covered in multiple media (see *Favored Theme*, opposite). MoMA’s exhibition draws from all these periods and interests, presenting Degas in his most personal and ephemeral guises. No other master devoted so much of his or her canon to monotypes, nor worked so well with the process. Degas’s painted prints were technically revolutionary, and undeniably evocative. ■

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