

Degas: Agency in Images of Women

BY EMMA WOLIN

Edgar Degas devoted much of his life's work to the depiction of women. Among his most famous works are his ballet dancers, bathers and milliners; more than three-quarters of Degas' total works featured images of women.¹ Recently, the work of Degas has provoked feminist readings of the artist's treatment of his subject matter. Degas began by sketching female relatives and eventually moved on to sketch live nude models; he was said to have been relentless in his pursuit of the female image. Some scholars have read this tendency as obsessive or pathological, while others trace Degas' fixation to his own familial relationships; Degas' own mother died when he was a teenager.² Degas painted women in more diverse roles than most of his contemporaries. But was Degas a full-fledged misogynist? That may depend on one's interpretation of his *oeuvre*. Why did he paint so many women? In any case, whatever the motivation and intent behind Degas' images, there is much to be said for his portrayal of women. This paper will attempt to investigate Degas' treatment of women through criticism, critical analysis, visual evidence and the author's unique insight. Although the work of Degas is frequently cited as being misogynistic, some of his work gives women more freedom than they would have otherwise enjoyed, while other paintings, namely his nude sketches, placed women under the direct scrutiny of the male gaze. Despite the ubiquity

¹ Richard Kendall, *Degas, Images of Women*, (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1989), 11.

² Richard Kendall, *Degas, Images of Women*, 11.

of women in Degas' art, the first exhibit to explicitly examine this topic did not occur until 1989, when the Tate Gallery of England featured a show focusing on women in Degas' work.

Recent scholarship places Degas in one of two camps: first, the notion that Degas is inherently misogynistic; second, that Degas did, in fact, privilege his women with more agency than they would have otherwise been afforded. The notion of Degas' misogyny was established and given its "classic literary formulation in the late nineteenth century by writers like Huysmans and Paul Valery," and since, "few scholars have expressed discomfort with this label, and none have stopped to evaluate its sources or question directly its validity."³ Other scholars have refrained from attacking the issue directly, such as Jean Sutherland Boggs, who proposed that Degas' portraits of women could be "enchanted, affectionate, perceptive in a way that suggests that his reputed misogyny was an affectation."⁴ In reading Degas' work as either purely misogynistic or privileging women, many scholars have overlooked the possibility of middle ground between the two. As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, Degas painted women in such an unprecedented and varied manner that casting definitive judgments about the artist's treatment of women often neglects the gray area between the two main assessments of his *oeuvre*.

Edgar Degas was born into an upper class aristocratic family. After completing his primary education, he enrolled in the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, where he studied under Louis Lamothe. It was there that Degas met the famed Neoclassical painter Jean

³ Norma Broude, "Degas's 'Misogyny,'" *The Art Bulletin* 59, no. 1 (March 1977): 95.

⁴ Norma Broude, "Degas's 'Misogyny,'" 95.

Auguste Dominique Ingres, who advised Degas to paint from both memory and life, and that by doing so he would, in time, become a great painter. Degas' social standing determined the way he interacted with many women, as well as his perceptions of lower and working class women, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Though contemporary scholarship has associated Degas with Impressionism, the artist himself rejected the term, finding it insulting. His earlier works are most accurately linked with realism, though as his career progressed, he moved towards Impressionism. Impressionists forewent the traditional, confining practice of painting indoors and rigorous academy training, as was common with Neoclassicism. Instead, they were largely self-taught and they opted to paint outside—*en plein air*—to maximize the benefits of natural lighting. Impressionists were concerned with capturing the way natural light struck their subject matter in precisely that moment, so that “they might be objectively, even scientifically, true to visual reality.”⁵ In this sense, according to Norma Broude, Impressionism can be understood as a “scientifically motivated form of optical realism as an art that rejected the expressive goals of the earlier Romantic movement.” Broude maintains, “even in relatively recent literature, we can still read that the Impressionists were artists who eliminated the reflection of human feelings in nature.”⁶ Just as Romanticism was a departure from the rigidity of Neoclassicism, Impressionism took this departure a step further, with long, thin and overall looser brushstrokes and “lack of conventional draftsmanship, which many critics of the period objected to, in

⁵ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 217.

⁶ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 217.

gendered terms, as feminine and suitable only to the limited intellectual capabilities of women."⁷ Impressionists did not attempt to disguise their brushstrokes. Often times, this technique resulted in an image that appeared to be fuzzy or in soft-focus. Minute details were sacrificed in favor of an overall visual effect. The inclusion of movement as part of the human experience of perceiving and viewing an image was of great importance to the Impressionists. Impressionistic works were never stagnant and have a dynamic rhythm that conveys motion and life. However, this technique also served to further the feminization of the genre, at least in Impressionist landscapes. One critic writing about the Impressionists in 1886 talked about the "masculine principle" that informed the figure paintings of Manet, Degas, Renoir, etc., while he found the "feminine" in the landscape paintings of Monet, Boudin, Sisley and Pissarro: "The tenderness and grace of Impressionism are reserved for its landscapes while for humanity there is only the hard reality of the naked truth."⁸ Critics such as Benedict Nicholson also saw this alleged harshness in figurative depictions, specifically in those of women, stating that Degas' paintings contained a "bewildering indifference to the grace of women...it is not that he treats a woman as though she were a horse: he treats her with more savagery."⁹

Degas' social standing determined how he encountered his subjects. Degas' first subjects were his female relatives: women of the same high social status as himself—though Degas generally did not afford the women he depicted with as much privilege as

⁷ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 221.

⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁹ Norma Broude, "Degas's 'Misogyny,'" 95.

he enjoyed as a man of the late nineteenth century. As Degas furthered his artistic career, he branched out and began painting working class women: ballet dancers, laundresses, shop-girls, milliners, and professional models with whom he came into daily contact. In a radical new way, Degas rejected the grandiose nature of the history painting that was typical of Neoclassicism and opted to paint more ordinary scenes that were true to modern life, which will be examined in more detail later.

In 1858, Degas lived in Italy with family and it was there that he created one of his earliest masterpieces, *The Bellelli Family* (Figure 1). Degas portrays his aunt, Laura Bellelli, as well as her husband and their two daughters. The pyramid composition of the women of the family demonstrates Degas' study of Renaissance art, which was abundant and readily available to him in Italy. Laura Bellelli's gesture connects and aligns her with her two daughters, who are seated in front of her. Meanwhile, the patriarch, Gennaro Bellelli, looks on somberly. While Laura's gestures connect her to her daughters, her husband's position renders him distanced from the women in his family. Correspondences between Laura Bellelli and her family confirm the unhappy union that existed between the two spouses.¹⁰ The father's position at the desk alludes to his role as a businessman, associating him with the outside world. The painting speaks to Degas' acute "awareness of his relatives' marital difficulties," as well as his "remarkable sensitivity to the subtle pressures and tensions that existed within the

¹⁰Eunice Lipton and Edgar Degas, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 31.

family unit.”¹¹ Though some have claimed that this painting, along with the time Degas spent in his relatives’ household in the midst of a failing marriage, speaks to a “permanent fear and suspicion of women” instilled in Degas from an early age, there is, according to Norma Broude, “nothing in the portrait itself that might tell us conclusively and objectively which side Degas’ own sympathies lay—if, indeed, he did take sides.”¹²

Historically, women have been the subject of male gaze and scrutiny in art, depicted as objects existing solely for the purpose of male pleasure. They are portrayed as submissive, a characteristic that is supported by gazes cast downwards, hardly ever making eye contact. Feminist art history turns its inquiry of these depictions outwards and attempts to “correct historical gender inequities by recovering women’s history and revealing gender distortion in the canonical record.”¹³ Unfortunately, a significant amount of scholarship on Degas is all too quick to dismiss his work as sexist and fundamentally harmful to women.

Interestingly enough, various paintings by Degas depict female subjects in the act of seeing. In *Woman With Field Glasses* (Figure 2), as the title suggests, Degas shows a woman looking blatantly outward at the viewer, holding a pair of spectacles up to her face. These works draw the viewer’s focus to the importance and the subjective nature of seeing. Degas claimed, “one sees as one wishes to see. It’s false; and it is this falsity that constitutes art.”¹⁴ Degas emphasized the discretionary nature of both seeing and the art making process. Other works make explicit reference to the visual process by showing

¹¹ Norma Broude, “Degas’s ‘Misogyny,’” 97.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 1.

¹⁴ Richard Kendall, *Degas, Images of Women*, 7.

women gazing into mirrors or examining other works of art. Degas' art claims that the act of seeing is not merely a passive one, rather an act that can be charged with significance, be it a message of vanity, sexuality, or inquiry. Feminist theory argues that there is a hierarchy of gender in Western culture's looking—men look, women are observed.¹⁵ According to this established canon, Degas' *Woman With Field Glasses* defies this trait with her blatant outward gaze. There is something scrutinizing, inquisitive, confrontational, and perhaps even threatening about the way the woman looks out at and confronts the viewer. This act is no doubt bold and purposeful, even more so for a woman in the late nineteenth century.

The ideal, proper woman of the nineteenth century was passive and docile, and did not leave her home unless she was escorted by a male chaperone. A woman behaving so brashly like the one in *Woman With Field Glasses* breaks free from this confining passivity to establish an unprecedented new standard. By depicting this woman so explicitly engaged in the act of seeing, and imbuing her with subjectivity, Degas empowers his subject with a privilege that was usually only enjoyed by men. In this sense, Degas' work can be seen as favorable and even empowering towards women.

Degas distinguishes in his paintings between a momentary glimpse and prolonged, thoughtful vision and contemplation; most of his works reflect the latter. Degas regularly painted and sketched from different vantage points, many of which were unprecedented in art. Often times Degas would position himself above or below his subject to gain access to a different way of seeing. This technique "created pictures of

¹⁵Griselda Pollock, *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, (London: Pandora, 1992), 106.

extraordinary originality and immediacy, but also placed [Degas] outside the conventional routines of human contact.”¹⁶ This vantage point permitted Degas to observe but not to participate, as though he were a fly on a wall, allowing him to assume a neutral vantage point. Notable is the fact that Degas only placed himself above his subjects when portraying working class women.¹⁷ His portraits of bourgeoisie women are conducted at eye-level with his patrons, suggesting an equality of status, whereas he literally looks down upon the lower class women, indicating their inferiority.

In Degas' pastel entitled *The Tub* (Figure 3), we see a woman's back as she kneels in a tub to bathe. This sketch is part of a series of nude bathers, a subject that preoccupied Degas throughout his career, particularly towards the end of his life. Degas has clearly sketched his model from a higher vantage point, perhaps a ladder. We see the delicate curves of the bather's back and hips as she crouches down to bathe. She delicately places her hair behind her neck and out of her way. There is an anonymous quality to the bather's identity, as we cannot make out many of the details of her face. The pastels give the work a soft feeling, much like the fuzzy out-of-focus effects seen in other Impressionist works done in oil paints. On the table beside her are the accoutrements of a woman grooming herself: a brush, a mirror, a water pitcher and a towel. In this respect, Degas' *The Tub* can be seen as documenting modern daily life, just as Degas' scenes of Parisian street cafes, operas, and millinery shops did. Degas indicates the bather's inferiority by placing himself, as well as the viewer, above her. We see this theme repeated in some of Degas' portrayals of ballet dancers, who were

¹⁶ Richard Kendall, *Degas, Images of Women*, 9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

considered working women in their time. By painting from different vantage points, and placing himself above his subjects, Degas reinforces longstanding societal norms regarding class interactions. The theme of a nude bather is repeated throughout Degas' *oeuvre*, particularly towards the end of his career when he focused on brothel monotypes.

Degas worked in a Paris that was on the cusp of the modern world as we know it. Society fixated on material goods; items for sale were on display wherever one looked—in shops, arcades, street corners and markets. Some women even offered their bodies as commodities. This fixation on material culture and buyer power is evident in the art of Degas, who painted modern city life. Some of Degas' favorite locations to depict were the race tracks, bars, operas, dance studios, outdoor cafés, and milliner shops that were frequented by the highest ranks of Parisian society. It was here that Degas encountered the upper classes (and those who worked tirelessly to entertain them) that captivated him and occupied the majority of his canvases. The work of Edgar Degas can be viewed as documentary evidence of the daily life of the upper class in Paris on the cusp of modernism. Degas was “uncompromisingly contemporary” in his images of women, who were seen “at their toilette or at their work in theaters, laundries, millinery shops or brothels,” thus stripped away of “idealized conventions, thereby challenging some of the most cherished myths of his society.”¹⁸ In this sense, Degas' paintings of working women provided them with more agency and influence than they would have otherwise.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Degas' 1882 work entitled *At the Milliner's* (Figure 4) is illustrative of Degas' depictions of women outside of the aforementioned "idealized conventions" of his time. In this painting, the artist returns again to the theme of vision—we see a woman looking in a mirror as she is trying on a hat in a milliner's shop. The mirror is turned away from the viewer, so that only the woman looking into it can see herself. On the opposite side of the mirror we see the milliner, who tends to the customer patiently, holding two other hat options in her hands. The milliner's face is obscured by the mirror, which trivializes her importance. She is just another member of Paris's working class. The customer glances in the mirror at her own reflection, scrutinizing her appearance and adjusting the hat that she is trying on. As Degas' other works from the theatre and nightlife of Paris show us, no self-respecting upper class French woman was seen in public without a hat. Degas privileges the act of seeing by not revealing the woman's reflection to the viewer and forcing one to imagine for oneself what the woman sees in the mirror. Though this image was created in pastels rather than oil paints, it still has the loose, sketch-like composition that was typical of Impressionist works.

In Degas' *Visit to the Museum* (Figure 5), we see fellow Impressionist Mary Cassatt and a female companion admiring paintings in the Louvre. As a woman of high social standing, she did not leave the house without a chaperone, who in this case is her female companion. Cassatt, whom Degas painted many times throughout his career, stands upright and self-assuredly with her fist firmly planted on her hip. While her companion looks at what appears to be a guidebook, perhaps directing the visitor as to how to interpret the piece, Cassatt stares directly at the work of art. This posture and

direct glance establishes Cassatt's sense of self as well as security with her identity. Cassatt's face is tilted slightly upward, exuding an air of confidence. Her cocked head shows the different angle she seeks in interpreting the painting. Her look is somewhat critical and scrutinizing, as if she has a critique to offer of the work she is examining. Surely, as an artist herself, Cassatt would have an opinion and perhaps even critique of the work. Cassatt's face is fully detailed, while the face of her companion is somewhat ambiguous and less defined. The darkness of the women's dresses is offset by the light colors of the wood of the floor and walls surrounding them. The thick brushstrokes are undisguised and make the act of creating the work of art just as important as viewing the work altogether. Degas does not show the actual painting that Cassatt is looking at—that is something the viewer is left to imagine for herself. Once again, Degas shows us women engaged in the act of seeing—a deliberate act charged with meaning—which lends itself to female agency.

In one of Degas' earlier works from 1860, *Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys* (Figure 6), we see a confrontation between two groups of Spartan youth, both minimally clad. The military state of Sparta afforded both men and women the same status, at least in terms of the right to cultivate a chiseled, athletic physique.¹⁹ The scene, which was first displayed in the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition of April 1880, has been interpreted as an "expression of competitive and unhealthy hostility between the sexes," one that reflected a "personal fear and dislike of women on Degas's part."²⁰ The painting takes

¹⁹ Martin Kemp, "Spartan Sport Laid Bare," *Nature* 454, no. 28 (2008): 1053.

²⁰ Norma Broude, "Edgar Degas and French Feminism, ca. 1880: 'The Young Spartans,' The Brothel Monotypes, and the Bathers Revisited," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 641.

place on an open, grassy plain with supple mountains forming in the background. The posture of both the young Spartan girls and boys suggests a climax in action—the peak of a moment that has been building up for quite some time. The girls lunge readily while extending their arms towards the boys, a gesture meant to provoke and taunt. The boys are stretching in the final moments before a presumed stand off, perhaps a race of some sort. One boy kneels on all fours, as though he has regressed to some sort of animalistic, primitive state. Both sexes entice the opposite with their gestures and glares. Degas captures a moment of the peak of heightened tension between the youths. Even the modern viewer gets a sense of anticipation of conflict and tension from the work; this is a testament to Degas' commitment to painting action and the emotions that surround it.

Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys communicates the stress and build-up present in the air just before competition. In the background, adults are gathered in a cluster, standing huddled before their children engage in a competition. The colors in this work are warmer hues, including yellows, oranges, and tan skin-tones. These colors are offset by the lush, green tones of the surrounding landscape. Degas' primary education, which included knowledge of classics and ancient civilization, would have informed his familiarity of Spartan social customs. Degas was "deeply interested in physiognomy, ethnography, anthropology, and criminology," all of which affected his understanding of the human body and the environments that primitive peoples found

themselves within.²¹ Norma Broude argues that the painting had a much different meaning when Degas exhibited it in 1880 than when he first began the work in 1860.²² In the 1880s in Paris, early ideas about French feminism were developing, emerging as a significant political force and social consciousness of the French people. The idea that women might be able to openly challenge their potential mates and male counterparts would have tied in to newly-forming ideas about women's rights. With this understanding, the painting was later described as a "natural confrontation among equals."²³ What appears on the surface to be homage to classical antiquity in the traditional manner of history painting turns out to be a documentation of classical gender roles applied to nineteenth century developing ideas about feminism.

Over the past century, there has been a tremendous amount of scholarship on Degas and his treatment of women. Some art historians argue that his images were fundamentally harmful to a woman's individuality. There are major issues with interpreting Degas' *oeuvre* as solely misogynistic or as privileging women with agency, as it is difficult to pinpoint Degas' treatment of women, because it varies from painting to painting. Paintings like *Woman With Field Glasses* empower the woman by giving her agency through her direct and outward stare. Works like *The Tub* are harmful to the status of women by portraying her as an object, not as a human being, to be—quite literally—glanced down upon. Degas sought to capture the daily life of the modern Paris in which he lived, and perhaps a woman's societal role was changing too quickly

²¹ Martin Kemp, "Spartan Sport Laid Bare," 1053.

²² Norma Broude, "Edgar Degas and French Feminism," 641.

²³ Ibid.

to be recorded accurately in a single work. Reading Degas' *oeuvre* as fundamentally misogynistic or as privileging women often results overlooking the middle ground between the two. In any case, one may look to Degas' *oeuvre* for a variety of representations of women.



Figure 1. *The Bellelli Family* (c. 1858-67), image courtesy of the Musée de Orsay

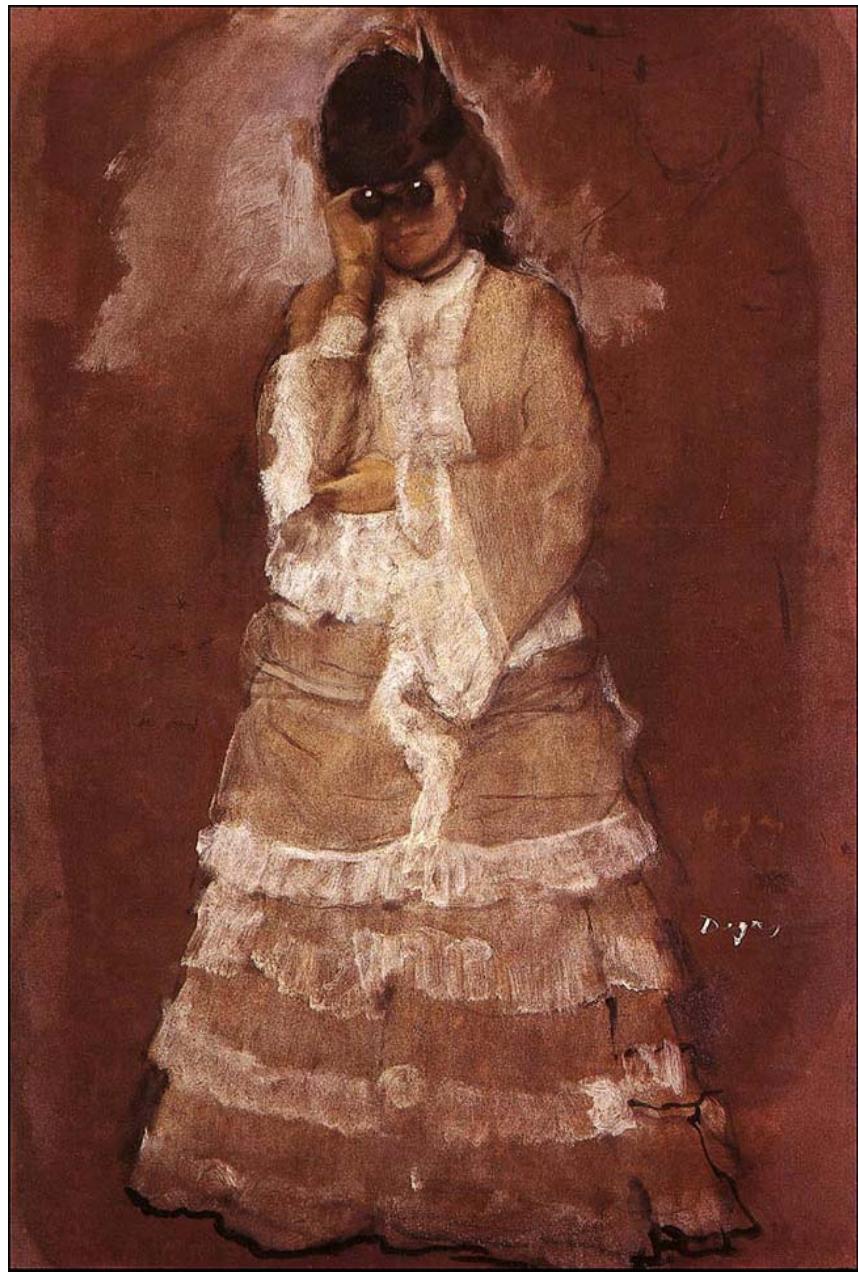


Figure 2. *Woman With Field Glasses* (c. 1875-6), image courtesy of Galerie Neue Meister



Figure 3. *The Tub* (c. 1886), image courtesy of the Musée de Orsay

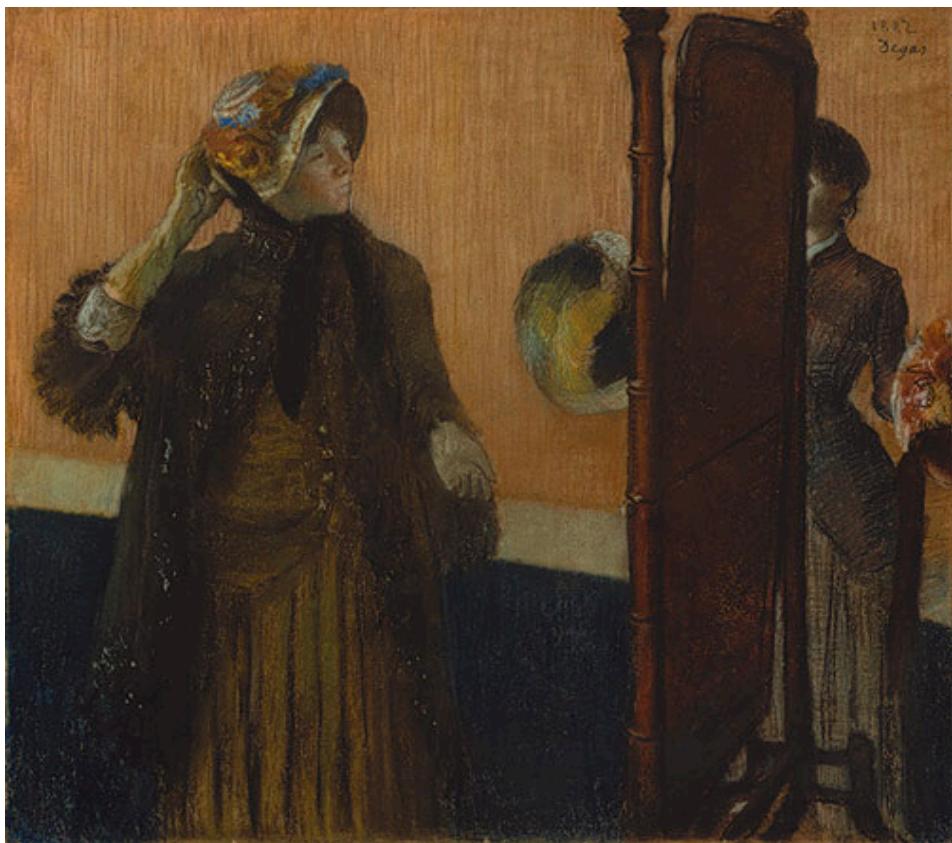


Figure 4. *At the Milliner's* (c. 1882), image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

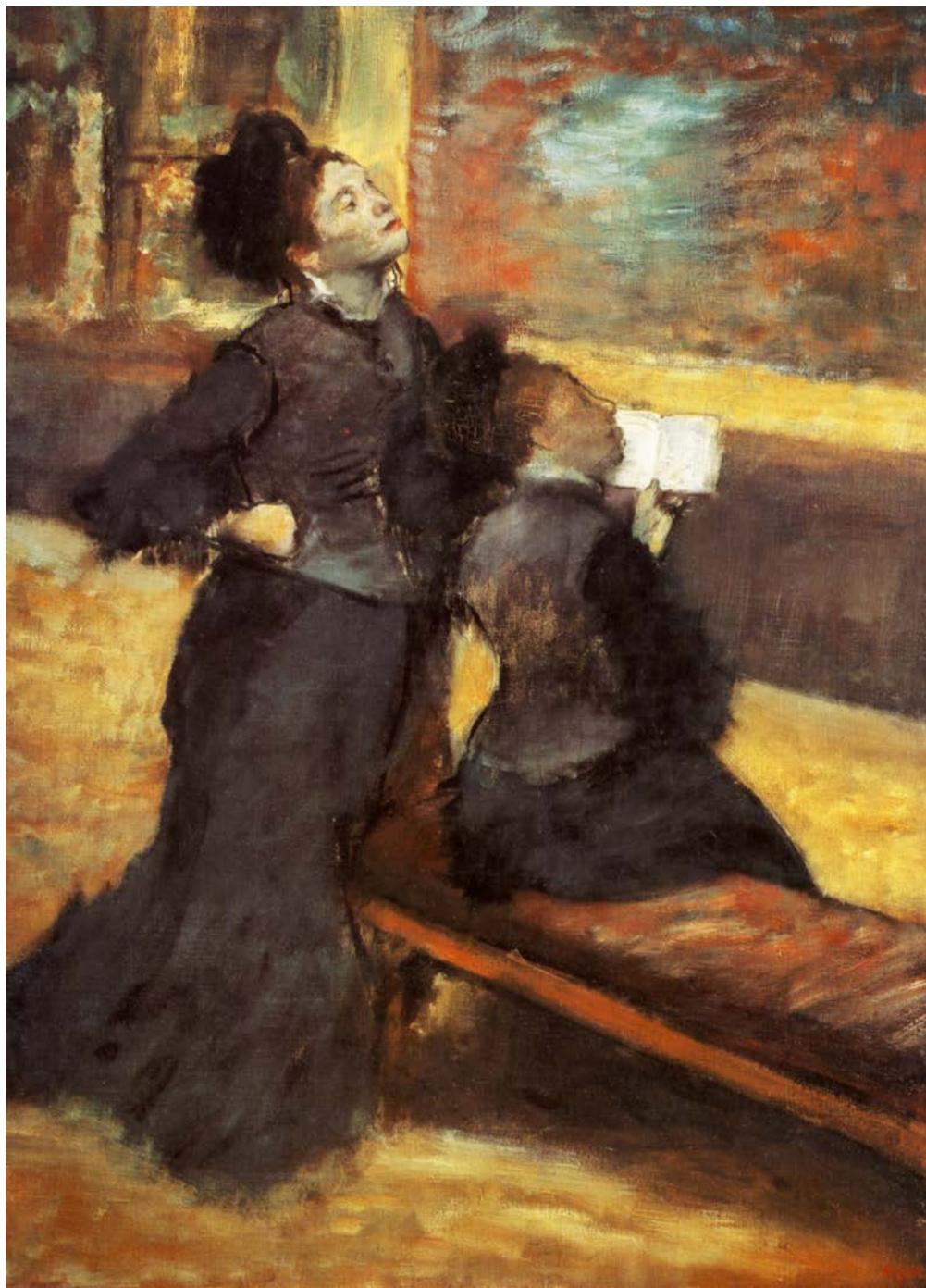


Figure 5. *Visit to a Museum* (c. 1879-90), image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts
Boston



Figure 6. *Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys* (c. 1860), image courtesy of the National Gallery, London