

2023

Decapitated Dancers: An Investigation of Nineteenth-Century Social Status and Class Representations in Degas's L'Orchestre de l'Opéra

Jon E. McGee

Eastern Kentucky University, jon_mcgee24@mymail.eku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/kjus>



Part of the [Labor History Commons](#), [Modern Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGee, Jon E. (2023) "Decapitated Dancers: An Investigation of Nineteenth-Century Social Status and Class Representations in Degas's L'Orchestre de l'Opéra," *Kentucky Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/kjus/vol6/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Decapitated Dancers: An Investigation of Nineteenth-Century Social Status and Class Representations in Degas's *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Amanda Strasik and acknowledge the contributions she made to this paper. Dr. Strasik's guidance strengthened this work, molding its final form. Dr. Strasik's own research accomplishments have served as encouragement and inspiration for me throughout my undergraduate education. I have been fortunate to have Dr. Strasik as a mentor throughout this project and privileged to have such a knowledgeable individual spend valuable time to help my work grow.

Decapitated Dancers

Jon E. McGee & Amanda Strasik, Ph.D.
Eastern Kentucky University

Abstract: *Edgar Degas is famous for depictions of ballet dancers. However, his earliest rendition of the subject in L'Orchestre de l'Opéra (Figure 1) is ignored for its ballerinas, who are beheaded by the pictorial frame. Despite the prevalence of dancers in his catalogue afterwards, scholarly discussion mostly focuses on L'Orchestre's primary subject, bassoonist Désiré Dihau, and his peers, making it an innovative portrait which conveys modern life with formalist techniques. Most prior discussion contends these dancers were not beheaded for content, but for a formalist exercise in dramatic cropping. Recent discourse relegates the ballerinas to the background as erotic objects. However, these discussions fail to consider the painting within the socio-economic and political context which gave ballerinas their status. By including context, I argue that L'Orchestre's dancers were decapitated by Degas in a final stage of decision making precisely because of their debased socio-economic class, incited by the Paris Opera's exploitation.*

Keywords: *Decapitated dancers, art, ballet, Degas*

Edgar Degas depicted ballet dancers frequently and famously. Degas, the son of a well-off banker, began his artistic practice focusing mainly on portraiture, dabbling in history painting, while quickly developing ambitious avant-garde pictorial techniques (Thomson, 2000). By the late 1860's, Degas' artistic interests transitioned away from more traditionally safe portrait work in favor of modern subject matter, in part to effectuate technical and conceptual interests concerned with the developments of modern social life and which ultimately produced the body of work that Degas is most known for (Thompson, 2000). Of this portfolio, depictions of ballerinas from the Paris Opera quickly became popular and economically fruitful for the artist, eventually rising to be one of his most heavily emphasized motifs (Thompson, 2000). But conspicuously, his 1870 oil painting *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* (Figure 1) – the earliest treatment of ballerinas in his artistic catalogue – is hardly recognized for its dancers. Instead, it is famous for being Degas's remarkable and innovative venture into group portraiture. I believe, however, that the artwork's dancers deserve greater attention. *L'Orchestre* does depict a distinguished group of musicians in the orchestra pit, focusing during a performance. Degas's patron, bassoonist Désiré Dihau, sits at the center. Dihau and his identifiable peers dress in concert tuxedos, eyes fixed forward, attentive to their task at hand. Their portraits immortalize their likeness and status in the arts and

Parisian culture: they are serious professionals. Above them, the ballerinas of the Paris Opera are at work too. These dancers are a striking presence. Their active legs sit situated just beneath draping pink and blue tutus, both sparkling by the dazzling work of stage lights. But, right at the neck, the dancers are decapitated by the upper border of the work's frame. These beheaded ballerinas, or what is left of them, are the most brightly rendered subjects in the painting – so brilliant, in fact, their skin is nearly washed out.

The dancers are hard to ignore. Nevertheless, much of the prevailing literature (Bolton, 1998; Fosca, 1954; Musée d'Orsay, n.d.; Terrasse, 1974) argues that, seemingly, they are no more than accoutrements to the musicians and their Paris Opera setting.¹ The latest academic discussion of the artwork (Nochlin, 1994; Denker, 2020) examines the dancers with greater critical insight, but concludes that they are merely erotic objects. While the relation of such a label to their socio-economic class remains understudied, recent forensic research by the Musée d'Orsay reveals that a “second phase” of decision making decapitated the dancers (Musée d'Orsay, n.d.). I believe that this careful deliberation calls the supposedly arbitrary nature of the dancers' beheadings into doubt. The musicians are dignified and identifiable, but Degas literally and figuratively relegates the ballerinas to the background. Following *L'Orchestre's* debut, Degas depicted dancers more often (Musée d'Orsay, n.d.), and

¹ The Bolton and Musée d'Orsay accounts of *L'Orchestre* are mainly used to represent the prototypical telling of the dancers and their role in the artwork throughout my analysis. The Musée d'Orsay's catalogue description focuses on summarizing widely accepted analyses of *L'Orchestre* most especially, and therefore serves to broadly capture the painting's discourse. Its bibliography cites

to most of the conventional academic discussions of the artwork, which repeat what Bolton, the Museum, and others offer in their explanations concerning dancers in near unanimity.

the importance of ballerinas in the artist's catalogue suggests that these early dancers bear more significance than the prevailing, politically neutral reading holds. I suspect their decapitation was a direct result of their socio-economic status. L'Orchestre's dancers were not beheaded arbitrarily: their class necessitated it. Thus, it indicates their socio-economic standing, captures their oppression, and explains their depersonalization – a result which cemented ballerinas and their socio-economic conditions as a primary focus of Degas's forgoing artistic practice.

Hausmannization, Rise of the Bourgeoisie, and Social Spectacle

In 1870 during the Second French Empire, increasing social changes reached an apogee in Paris, bolstered by the city's transformation under the supervision of Baron Haussmann, a French prefect of the Seine and Emperor Napoleon III's urban planner. Napoleon III, enlisting Haussmann, led an ambitious initiative to renew Paris's urban landscape and developed the city into a site of modern, bourgeois social and economic activity in doing so – a social and physical transformation now termed "Hausmannization" after its lead architect (Herbert, 1998; Clark, 1999). The project set out to disparage crime, benefit public health, and disable the political unrest made possible by the city's medieval architecture, overwhelmed infrastructure, and narrow, dingy streets (Herbert, 1988; Clark, 1999). Work began in the early 1850s (Clark, 1999). Haussmann's team widened medieval streets into broad boulevards, rendering Revolutionary tactics in urban warfare strategically impossible and making policing far more efficient (Herbert, 1988). Old homes, buildings, and shops were demolished to facilitate the new roads (Herbert, 1988). Paris's famous Haussmannian buildings were constructed along the boulevards (Herbert, 1988), whose uniform facades were designed to unite the city aesthetic (Clark, 1999). Their first floors accommodated commercial shops, living space for the wealthy on the second, proceeding in affordability through ascending floors (Herbert, 1988). Therefore, the boulevards attempted to suppress collective action and the volatile politics of prior decades, and the new buildings literally divided Paris by economic importance. These techniques were not exclusive to the new roads and city buildings. Thousands upon thousands of workers and poor residents were briskly displaced to the outskirts of Paris and made into socio-economic refugees by Haussmann's efforts (Herbert, 1988). High price of land, emphasis on commerce, and demolishing of old housing for expensive shops and apartments forced working people out of Paris and pushed their living and working conditions from daily visibility, strengthening the influence of the rising middle-class and transforming Paris into a city for bourgeois life (Herbert, 1988; Clark, 1999).

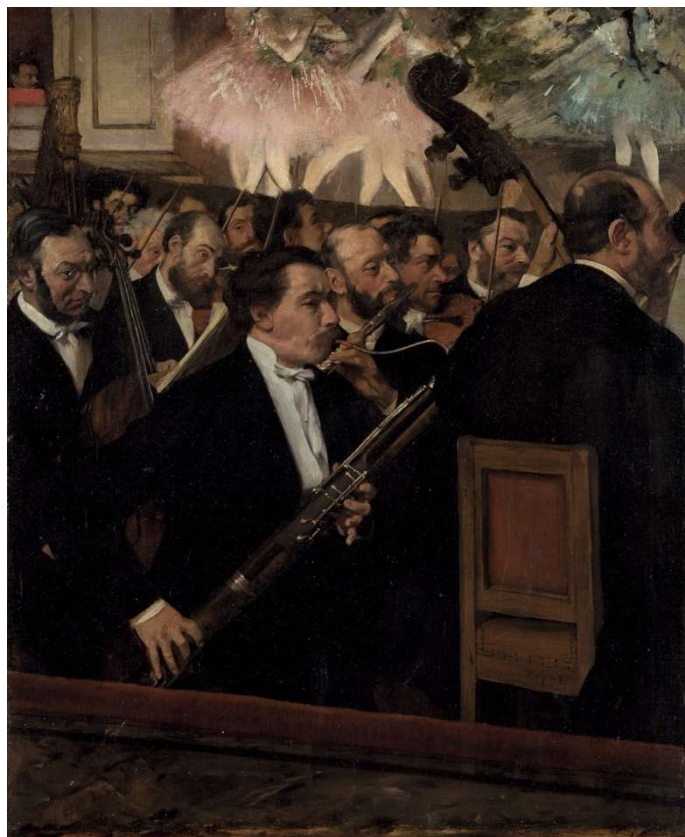


Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 22.3 x 18.1 inches. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

Hausmannization, besides these alienating effects, also rejuvenated the social field of Paris. The growing dominance of the bourgeoisie in the Hausmannized city led to an increase in leisure activity, economic consumption, social interaction, and entertainment (Clark, 1999). The boulevards were wide – providing fresh air, daylight, and plenty of space for walking to Parisians and tourists (Herbert, 1988). Paris was now pleasant enough for leisurely strolls and Haussmann's changes proved fertile for lively social activity (Thomson, 2000). The top-hatted figure of the flâneur, the quintessential urban gentleman, epitomized the affluent observers ambling all over the city (Herbert, 1988). Women did not enjoy the same agency; upper-class women were primarily measured for their maternal worth and were therefore relegated to domestic interior spaces (Broude, 2000). To maintain propriety, bourgeois women spectated from apartment balconies, strolled with their husbands, or were chaperoned by men to uphold their respectability and avoid being perceived as morally suspect (Broude, 2000). Perception – seeing and being seen – defined the new social intermingling of modern Paris, creating the social spectacle of the new city (Herbert, 1988; Clark, 1999). Public performances of socio-economic class, personifications of status through fashion, and chiefly, participation in leisure activities became the new social currency (Clark, 1999). Gustave Caillebotte's 1877 artwork *Paris Street; A Rainy Day* (Figure 2) captures a modern Parisian couple on one such social exhibition. A flâneur accompanies a

fashionable lady on the painting's right, intertwined at the arm, enjoying a leisurely stroll after a rainstorm. The couple gazes out to other bourgeois wanderers and they soak in the attire and activities of their peers, which signals their social status and standing. Others do the same to them.

This burgeoning society of spectacle culminated at the Opera, which was a premier site for performances of class and sociability in nineteenth-century Paris, a meeting point for the bourgeois – and at times, one juxtaposing the class of the audience with performers. At the theater, society was on display through the assembly of the bourgeois audience and the exhibition of its shows (Herbert, 1988; Clark, 1999). The Paris Opera, the official opera and ballet company of France since 1669, increasingly became surrounded by the socialite behavior that framed city life (Herbert, 1988; Clark, 1999). Newly situated in the Palais Garnier, a lavish Second Empire theater house (which, in 1870, was not fully constructed – though events began to take place that year nevertheless), the Paris Opera morphed into a site of bourgeois spectacle (Herbert, 1998; Clark, 1999).

Patrons enjoyed activities of entertainment and social spectatorship, epitomizing modern life and corresponding visual metaphors in Impressionist artworks (Clark, 1999). In *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (Figure 3), for example, Mary Cassatt paints an Opera goer, dressed in best fashion, surrounded by the glitzy Opera interior, making one such performance. The mirror at the back of her box reveals her vision, looking out to view the other attendees while she is seen by those looking in. This mirror combines perspectives and represents modern spectacle. While a performance takes place on stage, one also takes place among the crowd. Edouard Manet, in his 1873 painting *Masked Ball at the Opera* (Figure 4), depicts a bustling Opera lobby and the swarming social interaction of the night. Figures end abruptly at the painting's edge, legs dangle over a railing, and the National Gallery of Art commands that “[i]n contrast to the self-contained compositions of academic art, we are instantly aware that we see only a part of the scene,” and that the socializing represented extends beyond the picture frame, a grandness emphasized by Manet's dramatic cropping (National Gallery of Art, n.d.). The massive crowd of flâneurs, cloaked women, and one circus clown interact with a palpable energy. To the left, the clown is sliced through the middle by the edge of the painting's border, but his body's movement is still detectable. The same is true for the flâneur on the right side of the painting. At the bottom left of the artwork, the tail end of a black gown trails away from the center of the composition, cropped away from the body of its wearer, who is not pictured. This communicates a visual sense that the party – the spectacle, the pulsing social interaction – continues at frightening beat wherever the end of that gown is being led.



Figure 2. Gustave Caillebotte. (1877). *Paris Street; A Rainy Day*. Oil on canvas, 83.5 x 108.7 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

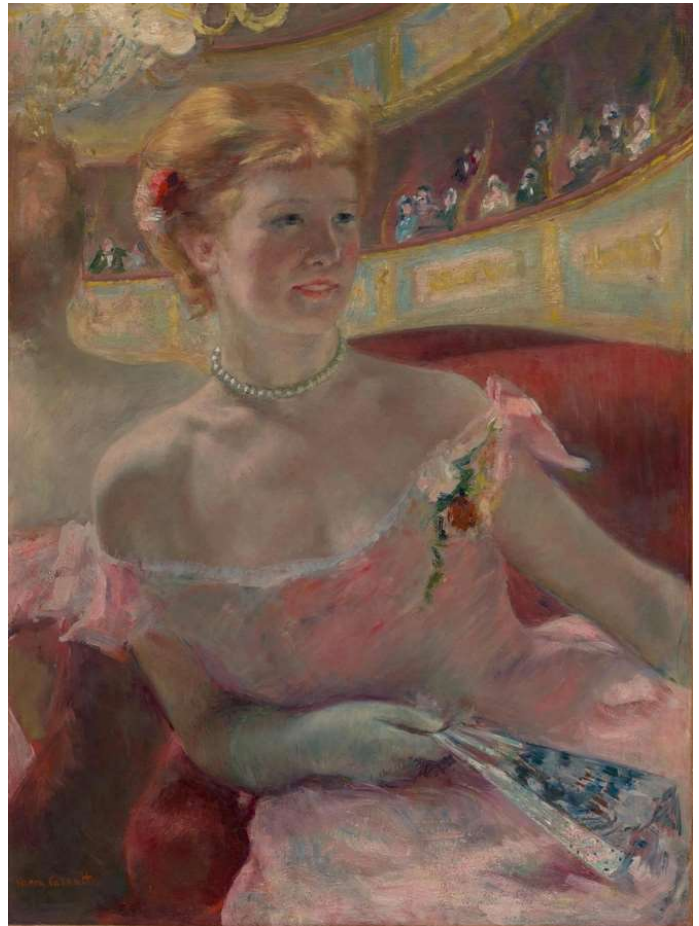


Figure 3. Mary Cassatt. (1879). *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge*. Oil on canvas, 32 x 23.5 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA.



Figure 4. Edouard Manet. (1873). *Masked Ball at the Opera*. Oil on canvas, 23.25 x 28.56 inches. The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

In *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, Degas embraces themes at the Opera, similarly, using obstructed and synthesized vision to convey the fast-pace of modern social interaction. However, where *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* and *Masked Ball* depicts an Opera audience and the social interaction between them, *L'Orchestre* shows the stage performance which the audience has come to see. The influence of photography is represented by the artwork's dramatic cropping, and his collaged perspectives communicate a visual sense of the rapid tempo and momentary interactions of modern social life (Thomson, 2000)². Degas used multiple views of the stage and musicians in *L'Orchestre* to concoct his multi-perspective image, highlighting the importance of individual perception and audience participation at Opera performances. The spectating bourgeois are not directly represented in *L'Orchestre*. Instead, the artwork's viewer is implied in this role. *L'Orchestre*'s synthesized perspective enables the viewers step into the role of the Opera patron and immerse themselves into a visual retelling what they might have seen that night. In photography, the picture borders of instantaneous snapshots interrupts forms, cutting off figures in movement, elements which Degas incorporates to reference new technology and emphasize fleeting expression of a scene from modern life, not unlike Manet in *Masked Ball*. These choices are made to portray modern social interaction. But, because this social interaction was highly contingent on performances of socio-economic class, these choices also intertwine with depictions of the Paris Opera's social and economic dynamics.

L'Orchestre de l'Opéra's Conventional Reading

Historically, analyses of *L'Orchestre* vaguely focus on the Opera as a site of modern life and omit its relationship to class,

despite the connections of the artwork's formal techniques to representations of socio-economic status and social hierarchy. They provide no critical insight into the resulting ideological implications, and simply offer descriptive claims regarding Degas's formal choices. Each of these descriptions of *L'Orchestre* insist that the image, made by the after-the-fact cropping of the dancer's heads, simply represents a "random snapshot," an artificial visual device referencing the "movement of modernity" or the influence of photography. Linda Bolton writes that this artificial device works "to create a reality of experience...involving the viewer to give the sensation that we ourselves are scanning the theater, and our opera glasses have alighted on the orchestra pit," all "musical friends of the Degas family" (Bolton, 1998, p.22), ensuring that the main attraction is indeed the musicians and the decapitated dancers, mere background characters, are accordingly of little primacy. The Musée d'Orsay insists that the painting's "subject here is the pit..." ensuring that any viewer's concern is with "[t]he musicians..." who "are all acquaintances of Degas," (Musée d'Orsay, n.d.). Another critic demands that "[t]he picture was meant to be – and is – a portrait of one of the musicians in the Paris orchestra, the bassoonist Desire Dihau," and the dancers are simply part of the painting's background (Fosca, 1954, p.42). Antoine Terrasse writes much of the same, and also notes that the "fragmentary glimpse of the onstage performance" is made for no other reason than to heighten a "sense of participation and reality" (Terrasse, 1974, p.19). However, Degas produced images, such as his 1872 work *Orchestra Musicians* (Figure 5), which achieved the same dramatic cropping without decapitating its dancers. By the conventional view, summarized by the above critical accounts, the beheading of the dancers says nothing of their socio-economic status; rather, it merely reflects the artistic conventions of the period – influenced by new modern technologies such as the camera. It views the Paris Opera quite generally as a site for modern life and does not confront the performances of socio-economic class and personifications of modern Parisian social hierarchies ubiquitous with the setting. The conventional view ultimately operates as an ideological construct, neutralizing *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*'s representations. In art historical discourse, ideology operates by presenting disputable meanings as constructed forms inherent and observed as reality (Clark, 1999), a process which is precisely demonstrated by *L'Orchestre*'s conventional reading. In his writing on ideology in art historical interpretations, T.J. Clark demands that "one ought to beware" of a notion of ideology which conceives of art as a set of "images, ideas, and mistakes," for representation "is different from this: it is more internal, interminable" (Clark, 1999, p.8). As such, one must beware of *L'Orchestre*'s traditionally accepted interpretation because it dismisses the performances of class ordinary to the Opera and

² In addition to photography, Japanese aesthetics played a significant role in shaping the Impressionist style. Japanese artwork – especially Japanese woodblock prints – greatly influenced Degas and his peers. See Belinda Thomson, (2000), *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception*, 99-100, 243;

Tanaka, Hidemichi, (2001), *Cézanne and 'Japonisme,' Artibus et Historiae* 22 (44), 201-220, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1483720>.

establishes the dancers' decapitation as no more than a compositional choice.

Certainly, aspects of the conventional reading of *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* are relevant. However, it limits the work's interpretation to an indifferent, ideologically neutral perspective. Elements in art criticism during the nineteenth-century developed to de-emphasize political subject matter and focus on formalist elements (Mainardi, 1985). Napoleon III and the haute bourgeoisie encouraged these changes to maintain ideological homogeneity and suppress criticism of the consumer culture and hedonism which fortified their cultural and political power (Mainardi, 1985). Manet's *Olympia* (Figure 6), for example, was taunted for its flatness, rather than its criticisms of modern society and the ascendancy of sex work in the French capital (Mainardi, 1985). Only later did T.J. Clark popularize the currently embraced socio-politically contextualized account, which would have been well known to *Olympia*'s viewers in 1863 despite omission from the artwork's discussion (Mainardi, 1985). I believe that the Musée d'Orsay and Linda Bolton also maintain the neutral, traditionally accepted view of *L'Orchestre* by focusing on formalism, precisely to maintain bourgeois strength. It is why their descriptions explain the ballerinas' decapitation as a mere consequence of aesthetic, stylistic choice. Like *Olympia*, *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* has been politically neutralized – co-opted by political powers to maintain uncritical ideological perspectives. I maintain that there is so much more to examine in *L'Orchestre* than the popular reading qualifies. Simply put, the conventional, neutralized reading of *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* can only be uprooted through political and socio-economic contextualization of its decapitated dancers and their social status.

A New Interpretation of *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*'s Beheaded Dancers

Linda Nochlin, in her book *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, set out a new investigative methodology and makes strides in examining the ideology implied in *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*. She determines two understandings of cropping ordinary to nineteenth-century art, which express either: (1) total contingency: "equivalent to the meaningless flow of modern reality itself," or the "random snapshot" explanation often compared to visual characteristics of photography; or (2) total determination: which understands cropping as deliberate – a consequence of artistic "will and...decision" (Nochlin, 1994, p.37). Nochlin argues that, given the ambiguity and emphasis on bourgeois social life in Impressionist artwork, cropping should not be limited to one interpretation or another, but instead viewed as oscillating between both (Nochlin, 1994). Using this framework, Nochlin investigates *L'Orchestre*: perhaps Degas's cropping can reflect a "random snapshot" of modernity as Linda Bolton and the Musée d'Orsay declare it in adopting the conventional view (Bolton, 1998; Musée d'Orsay, n.d.). However, as part of its snapshot, it also juxtaposes "individualized portraits of serious male professionals" against depersonalized women performers (Nochlin, 1994, p.37). Nochlin contends that this

depersonalization is further emphasized by the "phallic symbolism" of the double bass headstock (Nochlin, 1994). This view is briefly reiterated in Eric Denker's lecture at the National Portrait Gallery (Denker, 2020). While a correct step forward, I argue that this reading is far from complete. Confined by Nochlin to just a few paragraphs and by Denker to a few short statements, it still remains rather simplistic and only assesses the dancers as erotic objects without direct consideration of their economic class, social status, or exploitation by the Paris Opera.

To fully understand the dancers' decapitations, we must examine the social context of the Opera's workers since the Opera was also a place of labor for the ballerinas rehearsing and performing there. The young dancers of the Paris Opera were largely working class, with the promise of a salary encouraging proletarian families to enlist their daughters, who were barred from laboring in factories in 1841 (Coons, 2014). However, the pay was poor, and their predatory contracts reeked of ownership; demanding rehearsals and new legislation prevented the dancers from supplementing income with factory work or any other employment (Coons, 2014). The dancers were also required to live in Paris, which was exceedingly expensive and difficult to manage with their meager ballet paychecks (Coons, 2014). The poorest young girls often performed sexual favors to male, bourgeois ballet subscribers (their 'protector' or 'abonné') to boost their income and be promoted among the ballet's ranks (Coons, 2014).

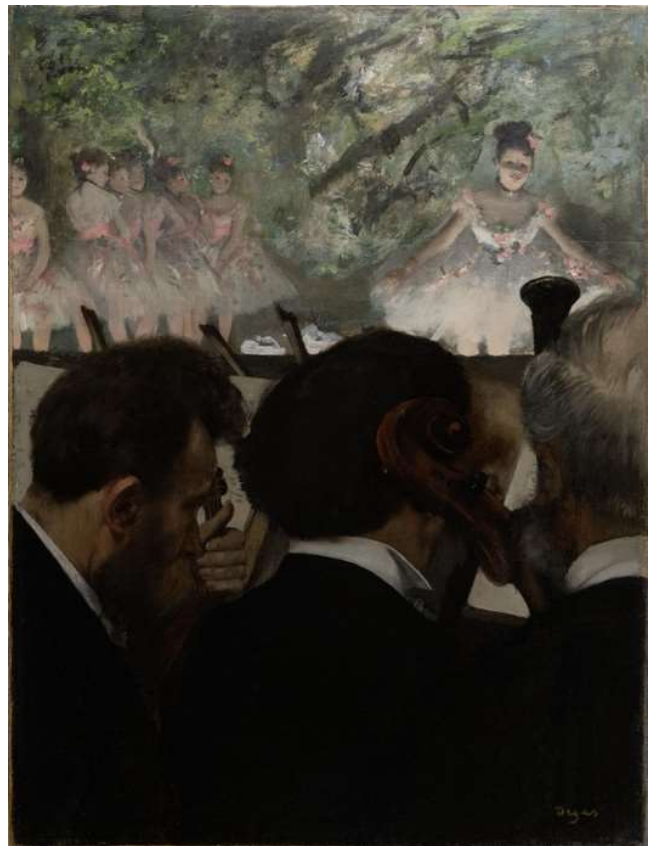


Figure 5. Edgar Degas (1872). *Orchestra Musicians*. Oil on canvas, 25 x 19.2 inches. Städel Museum, Frankfurt, DE.



Figure 6. Edouard Manet (1863). *Olympia*. Oil on canvas, 51.4 x74.8 inches. Musee d’Orsay, Paris, France.

The men of the Jockey Club, a wealthy gentlemen’s association, famously occupied expensive Paris Opera boxes to view ballet performances. They also frequented the foyer de la danse, a practice room right behind the Opera stage (Garafola, 1985). Once the Opera was privatized in 1830 and thereafter, the foyer de la danse was a place to get ready before a performance, and after, a place to reward wealthy Opera patrons with “special privileges,” and win financially struggling dancers abonné sponsorship (Garafola, 1985, pg.36). Because of this, dancers were categorized as morally suspect and without talent, irrespective of their skill, rigorous training schedule, or work ethic (Coons, 2014). The exhausting demands and hard work of ballet training did not matter. In the nineteenth century, dancers for the Paris Opera lacked professional respect while suffering poor working and living conditions. Due to their status as women and categorization as morally corrupt, they were often reduced to erotic objects (Coons, 2014), which their financial domination by the Paris Opera and its subscribers enabled. Therefore, the Paris Opera should be viewed not only as a site of spectacle for the bourgeoisie, but a meeting point between the classes and a personification of the era’s rigid social hierarchy. As a setting, it juxtaposes the material conditions of others in the Opera space with those of the dancers – a pertinent dichotomy due to their sexual exploitation, enabled by economic desperation.

Demeaning L’Orchestre’s dancers as background objects – only significant for establishing the work’s ambience and indicating Degas’s photography-inspired cropping – is too easy and ideologically convenient for the Musee d’Orsay, Bolton, and the countless critics who founded such writings and who desperately wished to remain politically neutral. Even more, merely assessing their presentation as erotic objects fails to provide a full understanding of their debased status. The profound domination of the dancers by the Paris Opera apparatus itself must be emphasized, without limitation to their sexual exploitation, to understand the full scope of the dancers’ beheading in the artwork. From enlistment, abonné sponsorship, to post ballet life, the options available to dancers in nineteenth-century Paris were exceedingly limited. The dancers in

L’Orchestre de l’Opéra did not lack the work ethic nor achievement embodied by the representation of the musicians. Their status – due to the combined factors of their economic status, gender, and occupation – disembodied dancers from narrative control in cultural reputations. Even those from affluent backgrounds faced dilemmas. The stigmatization of the discipline became so fanatical that well off parents seldom allowed their daughters to join (Coons, 2014). Ballerinas who did enjoy celebrity status were few – regardless of the hard work and dedication of many (Coons, 2014). In contrast to the difficult circumstances felt by dancers, in nineteenth-century Paris, a successful bassoonist such as Désiré Dihau held similar social status to a visual artist, as indicated by Degas’s intellectual respect and friendship with Dihau. A musician could afford to commission to concoct L’Orchestre from Degas, who was of affluent beginnings and quickly gaining artistic popularity, capturing his likeness and immortalizing his professional achievements (Loyrette et al., 2020).

Based on available evidence and in light of the social context of nineteenth-century ballerinas at the Paris Opera, I believe Degas’s after-the-fact choice to guillotine the top of L’Orchestre de l’Opéra was a deliberate move to effectuate the painting’s purpose as a portrait. The beheading of the dancers in L’Orchestre de l’Opéra is intertwined with the needs of Degas’s client, Désiré Dihau. As a portrait, and therefore an instrument of ideology which represents socio-economic status (Baxandall, 1988), including individualized representations of dancers would have likely distracted viewers from Dihau, the primary subject. Further, it was at odds with depicting its musicians as respectable. To be shown along with similarly individualized dancers would have associated the musicians with the corrupted, disrespected status of le petit rats. Many ballerinas of the Paris Opera were impoverished, barred from taking on supplementary work, prevented from performing elsewhere, and were repeatedly forced into prostitution to survive. Accordingly, their public image was poor. Because of this, regardless of the similar creative disciplines of ballerinas and musicians, and no matter the rigorous work ethic required by both professions, Degas cuts the dancers off at the neck and disregards them as background objects to ensure Dihau and his peers are dignified – the conventional, politically neutral discussion of the artwork (Bolton, 1998; Fosca, 1954; Musee d’Orsay, n.d.; Terrasse, 1974) emphasizes the same. The dancers are thus denied of their identity and personhood, while the opposite is true for the work’s male musicians.

Because of their contrary social positions, Degas represents musicians at work as individuals in L’Orchestre, not as members of a class or category (Reff, 1976). Dihau held the freedom to pursue multiple creative outlets, compose music, and make social appearances at café-concerts for performances (Loyrette et al., 2020). Meanwhile, dancers were contractually prevented from outside dance work. Dihau would have also enjoyed many creative and networking opportunities not afforded to the Paris Opera’s dancers, who had brutal “quasi-military training” and whose contracts kept them from leaving their troupe to dance elsewhere for its duration (Coons, 2014). Because of Dihau’s

greater social standing, in 1870, Degas paints him and his colleagues as peers. By contrast, Degas's interests in the dancers' individualities in *L'Orchestre* are secondary to his interest in their social conditions and occupations within the Opera system. In Degas's later work featuring dancers, he continues to downplay ballerinas' identities by showing them with stereotypically low foreheads, stubby faces, and protruding jaws, which bourgeois social reformers claimed to make the *petit rat* intrinsically prone to vice (Coons, 2014). The artist's famous sculpture *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer* (Figure 7), conveys these stereotypes. Degas's model for the sculpture, Marie Van Goethem, was one of few dancers to obtain celebrity status – though she was most famous for being a “dancer with the lightest morals,” who was “eventually dismissed from the Paris Opera” (Coons, 2014, pg. 141). Accordingly, her side profile reveals a low-sloping forehead and flat facial structure to embody her supposed depravity, even though Degas attempted to incorporate portrait features (Coons, 2014). Critics responded, claiming *The Little Dancer* was a work of “instructive ugliness,” comparing the ballerina to a “monkey” for her low forehead and lips, which they thought to indicate her “heinous character” (Coons, 2014, pg. 141).

Degas's cropping leaves his audience to view a fantastical milieu of colorful bodies belonging to young and beheaded *petit rats*, dancers of the Paris Opera, objectifying them for aesthetic pleasure. Émile Zola, a French novelist and advocate of the *avant-garde*, once observed the “fiercely obscene effect” of headless store-window mannequins (Reff, 1976). Similarly, Zola's peer Degas likely observed this tantalizing effect after his alterations to *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, which certainly could be understood to imply the perversion of the *abonné*. Ignoring the decapitation, as *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*'s conventional reading does, or even to simplistically render their beheadings as evidence of eroticization, further mythologizes the dancers without the context imposing their debased status. I believe the broader socio-political context shows that the opposition of the musicians' status to that of the *petit rat*'s, from the perspective of the Opera audience, entirely necessitates their decapitation in *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*. It was demanded by the standing of the dancers, whose exploitation was not restricted to their objectification by the *abonné*. Given the likelihood of after-the-fact cropping (Musee d'Orsay, n.d.), it is plausible that this juxtaposition was even emphasized by Degas. Contrary to what the conventional reading sets forth, perhaps the ever-astute artist observed the intriguing possibilities enabled by their decapitation and was startled by the effects of his changes, for *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*'s dancers suddenly exemplified the social contrast which the artist yearned to capture. This could also explain why Degas dropped the title “Portrait of Désiré Dihau” for the more ambiguous *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* in its exhibition, and why Degas, known to constantly alter, supposedly grew to view this as perhaps one of his few truly finished works (Loyrette et al., 2020). In any case, the cropping transformed *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* from a simple portrait to a striking investigation into the economic and social alienation

modernity forced onto the young and exploited Paris Opera dancers.

The success of *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*'s decapitation in producing these social juxtapositions may indicate why Degas's next major work at the Opera, his 1872 painting *Orchestra Musicians*, depicted the same opposition, but with the heads of the dancers intact. It is undeniable that after Degas's surprising results in *L'Orchestre*, ballet dancers became one of his most depicted subject matters (Thompson, 2000). Indeed, after Degas finished *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, dancers grew of great interest to Degas, which was further encouraged when his ballet subjects began selling for over 1,000 francs (Thomson, 2000). Though not headless, Degas's later depictions of dancers were not exactly more individualized than those in *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*. As in *The Little Dancer*, many of Degas's later treatments included the stereotyped sloped forehead and stubby features often used to indicate low economic status, and the eerie presence of an *abonné* (Coons, 2014). In *L'Attente* (Waiting) (Figure 8), Degas obstructs the visibility of the ballerina's and mother's face entirely, depersonalizing the figures and simply using their bodies to represent a destitute class. They are hunched over, they make no recognition to each other, and Degas keeps their faces from the full view of his audience. They appear solemn, visually quiet, insecure; they sit, they anticipate, their body language makes their confidence small and vulnerable. The *Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage* (Figure 9) takes this representation of depravity even further, by including the unsettling presence of two ogling *abonnés* at stage side while the ballerinas strenuously fulfill their militant practice regiment. In a sense, these methods of depiction are used by Degas to patronize, communicating a sense of the artist's pity – particularly when tied with additional *inuendo* spurred by the presence of an *abonné*. As a man of affluent background (Thompson, 2000), Degas usually presented stereotypical renderings of those less economically fortunate. Interestingly, *L'Orchestre* avoids these acute distortions, free of the undermining effect of artistic intent or the compromising backing of commercial success. Thus, unlike Degas's 1874 work *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage*, or his 1880-82 work *L'Attente* (Waiting), *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* transcends its status as an artistic creation, and instead occupies an unstable and shifting space as a social record, enabling intriguing interpretations and truly representing the social attitudes towards the dancers of the Paris Opera at the time.

Conclusion

L'Orchestre de l'Opéra beheads its dancers because their status demanded it. Their decapitation is premised upon their socio-economic standing; thus, it captures their oppression and explains their depersonalization. These results, perhaps initially unintended, cemented ballerinas and their conditions as a primary focus of Degas's forgoing artistic practice. The Musee d'Orsay, Linda Bolton, and the other critics that their analyses were founded upon provide conventionally held readings of *L'Orchestre* which deemphasize such implications to neutralize visual elements, attributing them to Degas's experiments with

new styles of painting. However, these perspectives downplay the Opera's role as a site for performances of class and status, not to mention a place of labor for the ballet dancers. My analysis of Degas's *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* reveals these new representational possibilities through an investigation of the socio-economic class of its dancers with the gender politics of the Paris Opera and nineteenth-century France. In *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, the poor working conditions, low wages, and sexual exploitation of the young, often proletarian ballet dancers are reiterated in the brutality conveyed through their beheadings. Set against individualized portraits of male musical performers, who possess the social and economic status not afforded to dancers despite their similar creative fields, the ballerinas' depersonalization of moves beyond simple representations of sexual objectification. The individualization of the painting's musicians unveils the work's supposed paltry cropping to instead embody the subjugation of the Paris Opera's young dancers in nineteenth-century France. My contextualization of *L'Orchestre* within historically relevant frameworks regarding the role portraiture, the status of the Paris Opera, and the rise of the bourgeois in nineteenth-century Paris, expands the understanding of representations of socio-economic class for the Opera's dancers – especially pertaining to the work of Degas. Furthermore, the examination herein indicates that *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra* was likely a watershed work for Degas, who used *L'Orchestre*'s effects as a blueprint for countless future representations of ballet dancers. In the words of Belinda Thomson, when “Degas invites us to watch the ballet, we are often required to make the best, as in life, of obstructed visibility, rather than afforded an ideal, central viewing position” (Thomson, 2000, p.196). In *L'Orchestre de l'Opéra*, Thomson's observation extends to representations of social class. Underpaid and often sexually exploited, categorized as morally corrupt, and ultimately reduced to sexual objects, Paris Opera ballet dancers were not given an ideal position in nineteenth-century Paris.

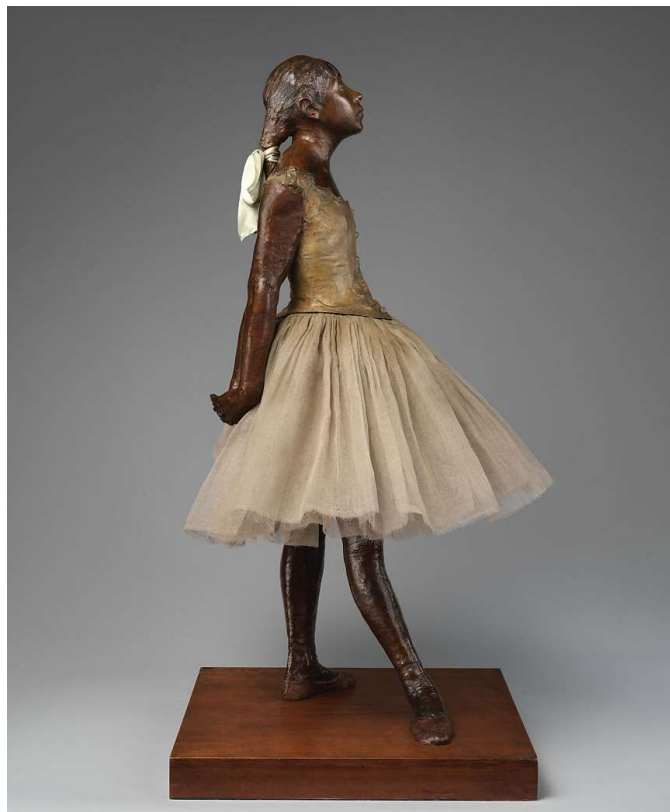


Figure 7. Edgar Degas. (1922 cast of 1881 original). *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*. Partially tinted bronze, cotton tarlatan, silk satin, and wood, 38.5 x 17.25 x 14.37 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

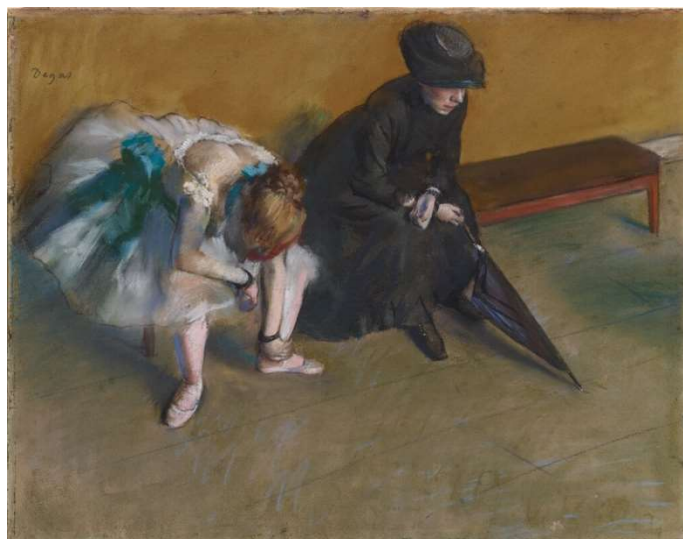


Figure 8. Edgar Degas. (1882). *L'Attente (Waiting)*. Pastel on paper, 19 x 24 inches. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 9. Edgar Degas. (1874). *Rehearsal of the Ballet on Stage*. Pastel on paper, 21.35 x 28.75 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

References

- Baxandall, M. (1998). Conditions of Trade. In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (2nd ed.), 1-27. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bolton, L. (1998). *The History and Techniques of the Great Masters: Degas*. New York, NY: Chartwell Books.
- Broude, N. (2000). Mary Cassatt: modern woman or the cult of true womanhood? *Woman's Art Journal*, 21(2), 36-43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358749>
- Clark, T.J. (1999). *The Painting of Modern Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coons, L. (2014). Artiste or Coquette? Les Petits Rats of the Paris Opera Ballet. *French Cultural Studies* 25(2), 140-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155814520912>
- Denker, E. & The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (2020). *Degas at the Opéra: An Introductory Slide Overview*. <https://www.nga.gov/audio-video/video/degas-at-the-opera-an-introductory-slide-overview.html>
- Fosca, Francois. (1954). *Degas (The Taste of Our Time)*. Geneva: Skira.
- Garafola, Lynn. (1985). The travesty dancer in nineteenth-century ballet. *Dance Research Journal*, 17(2), 35-40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478078>
- Herbert, Robert. (1988). *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Loyrette, H., Jones, K. A., Jarbouai, L., Kisiel, M., Lee, J., Duisinberre, D., & Degas, E. (2020). *Degas at the Opéra: Exhibition Catalog*. London, EN: Thames & Hudson.
- Mainardi, P. (1985). The political origins of modernism. *Art Journal*, 45(1), 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1985.10792271>
- Musee d'Orsay. (n.d.) L'Orchestre de l'Opéra. <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/orchestre-de-lopera-10001#artwork-indexation>
- National Gallery of Art. (n.d.) *Masked Ball at the Opera, Overview*. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.61246.html#overview>
- Nochlin, L. (1994). *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson.
- Reff, T. (1976). *Degas: The Artist's Mind*. London, EN: Thames & Hudson.
- Terrasse, A. (1974). *Degas*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Thomson, B., & Howard, M. (2000). *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson.