

Working Women: Attitudes to Female Labour in 19th-century Art



Grande Arabesque, Third Time, Edgar Degas, model: about 1885-90, cast: 1919-21, bronze, 44.5 X 55.3 x 29 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



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A Peasant Woman Digging, Vincent van Gogh, 1885, oil on canvas, laid down on panel, 42 x 32 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to another of our online talks given by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham. I'm Mimi Buchanan, Learning & Engagement Intern at the Barber from January to June 2020. I'm excited to be speaking to you about two artworks in the Barber's collection, Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) painting *A Peasant Woman Digging*, and Edgar Degas's (1834-1917) sculpture *Grande Arabesque, Third Time*. We're going to have a close look at these works and consider them in relation to attitudes towards female labour during the nineteenth century.

I'll begin by describing *A Peasant Woman Digging*. In this work, painted by Van Gogh in 1885, a woman bends over as she digs into the earth at her feet. Her stance is strong and sturdy. With her legs planted firmly in the ground and her knees slightly bent, she grips her spade with both hands, denoting the great force required to plunge her tool into the soil. The paint is applied boldly and densely, with thick, dark blue outlines on her dress depicting its heavy folds. Her feet are hidden inside large clogs which prevent her from sinking into the mud. Van Gogh provides us with a close-up view of this woman, leaving little room to depict her surroundings. What can be seen of the landscape around her is split into four horizontal sections, each defined by clusters of rough brushstrokes, in varying shades of brown, green, yellow and grey. This limited palette of earthy colours appears in patches on her dress, so that the woman somewhat blends into her setting. As she bends over, her face is hidden to the viewer, so she remains anonymous. Van Gogh has paid close attention instead to the drabness of her clothing, her dull, dismal surroundings and the strenuousness of her labour.

Degas's *Grande Arabesque, Third Time* also depicts a working woman, but in a very different manner. The subject is a ballerina, who lunges forward with her left leg extended high in the air behind her, and her right bearing all her weight. She stretches her arms out to either side of her body, to assist her balance. Her pose is impressive, the carefully defined muscle in her arms, legs and stomach showing off her strength. The woman lifts her head gracefully, helping to reveal her remarkably robust form. The

sculpture was cast in bronze in about 1920 (so after Degas's death) from a wax model found in his studio. Degas made lots of these small wax studies, which he never intended to display publicly. He perpetually edited and adapted them, to help him study bodily movement and form, before sometimes destroying them. The malleable softness of the wax helped Degas to depict the dancer's body and pose in detail. If you look closely, you might be able to see where the artist has pushed and pinched certain areas to form the dancer's muscles. You might also see the lines and ridges that he has dug into the wax with his nails. These echo the shape of her muscles and the direction in which her limbs move, again denoting the dancer's impressive posture. They turn a static sculpture into a moving image, evoking elegant, flowing actions. The dancer appears effortlessly graceful, her body beautifully balanced. Unlike Van Gogh's peasant woman, Degas' dancer shows little sense of strain or hardship. The ballerina's identity remains anonymous due to the lack of detail on her face. Although we would expect a ballerina to be dressed in a leotard and tutu, this dancer is naked, she doesn't even wear ballet shoes. This highlights that the focus of the artwork is on depicting her movement and bodily form, rather than a particular person.

Peasant Woman Digging and *Grande Arabesque* were made during the same decade, in around 1885. Exploring attitudes towards gender roles during the late nineteenth century will help us to understand more about why Van Gogh and Degas depicted working women in the ways that they did. During this century there was a strong divide between the roles of men and women across Europe. While men were expected to go out to work and support their family financially, women were pressured to remain at home, focussing on running a household and raising children. Therefore, women who sought careers outside of their domestic duties were deemed un-natural and amoral. This attitude permeated all aspects of nineteenth-century culture. An example of this is Mrs Jellyby, a character in Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*, who is caricatured and judged as neglectful of her maternal duties because she is setting up a mission in Africa. Consequently, as art historian Linda Nochlin argues, working women were rarely considered a serious subject matter for artists.

While women who worked were generally frowned upon, many lower-class women had to take professional jobs in addition to their domestic work. Agricultural labourers like the woman Van Gogh depicts made up a large proportion of women in this situation. Around the time that this painting was made, Van Gogh wrote in a letter to his brother about a 'woman ... seen from the front, her head almost on the ground, digging carrots'. He explained that he had been watching agricultural workers for a year and a half, 'just to catch their character'. He painted and drew this woman numerous times, demonstrating his fascination with her manual labour. As previously discussed, the woman remains anonymous, emphasising that this painting is not about a specific person, but about the unforgiving toil of agricultural work. It could be said that Van Gogh painted with a sympathetic tone, highlighting the gritty reality of this woman's situation.

While the subject of Degas's sculpture is also a working woman, the laborious nature of her work is overlooked. As Nochlin points out, Degas's depictions of dancing fell into the category of leisure or entertainment, rather than work. The purpose of dance was to make it appear easy and spontaneous to the audience, which Degas highlights in his wax model. The artist Walter Sickert visited Degas's studio at night-time and recalled that the artist 'held a candle up and turned the statuette to show me the succession of shadows cast by its silhouette'. This demonstrates that Degas was intrigued by the performative nature of dancing and by the body in space, focusing on depicting the mesmerising way that ballerinas moved. In Degas's sculpture, the dancer is removed from any real-life setting. Her naked body floats in space, the viewer gaining no sense of when or where this is. This emphasises that the focus is on the dancer's movement, therefore any context is removed.

Despite widespread disapproval of working women during the nineteenth century, both Van Gogh and Degas depicted this subject in the broadest sense. Van Gogh painted a toiling peasant, who had no choice but to work in order to survive. It is possible that he was seeking an overlooked subject, which contradicted social standards. Meanwhile, Degas's sculpture ignored the laborious nature of the work he portrayed, emphasising the drama of dance. In his sculpture, the dancer acted solely as a vehicle for his study of form and movement.

What similarities and differences can you see between Van Gogh and Degas's works? What do you think they say about nineteenth-century attitudes towards gender? We would love to hear your thoughts and ideas, or answer any questions you have. Send us a message via our social media platforms or email the gallery (at info@barber.org.uk).

If you enjoyed this podcast and want to learn more about the Barber's collections, tune in next week to hear our Learning & Engagement Co-ordinator Becca Randle discussing George Bellow's *Nude, Miss Bentham*. Thank you very much for listening to this short talk.

Speaker info

Mimi Buchanan has been working at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Learning & Engagement Intern since January 2020.

Prior to her internship, Mimi completed an MA at the University of Birmingham in Art History and Curating. As part of the course she co-curated *The Paper Museum: The Curious Eye of Cassiano dal Pozzo*, which was on display at the Barber Institute from June to September 2019. She wrote her dissertation on depictions of gender in the art of Birmingham Surrealist artist Conroy Maddox.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

Locheed, Jessica. 'Beyond the form: the ineffable essence of Degas' sculpture' in *Sculpture Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2009, pp. 86-91.

Monnier, Genevieve. 'Edgar (Hilaire Germain) Degas' in *Grove Art Online*. Published online: 2003.

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Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge. 1988.

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