Visual Analyse Of A Group Of Dancers By Edgar Degas

Degas had become friends with Manet after a chance meeting in Louvre. They both painted similar subjects in absinth drinkers, waitresses, café-concerts and the side of society that was ignored by most of the inhabitants of Paris but was always seen by the flaneur. However, Degas became more identifiable with the ballet dancers because he painted them over and over throughout his career. Degas was a classically trained artist, which is noticeable in his early painting and in his initial ballet rehearsal painting, but he also experimented with various mediums. These included experimenting with pastels and oils to achieve an aesthetical effect and photography to achieve a compositional effect to produce paintings that were quite different to most other Impressionist artist. A Group of Dancers (c.1898) is one of his late works, which brings together many of these experiments. The combination of photography and movement can be seen in the in the dancers. This movement is highlighted by the use of colour in the background and impasto on the models themselves. The most important technique is the use of mirrors, which was another recurring aspect of his paintings, to show otherwise unseen side to the opera house.

The opera houses in Paris were mainly attended by the aristocrats of society, especial men, who would become patrons, or abonnés, of the opera and were allowed free run of the opera house including backstage, rehearsal rooms and even the dressing rooms. When Degas first started painting scenes from the opera it was historical style paintings of the operas themselves. It was not until 1868 that he began to paint the contemporary ballets. However, these were painted from the perspective of the audience and the primary subjects were the orchestra rather than the stage. The figures of the orchestra can be clearly distinguished, but the stage in the background is just a blur of indistinguishable activity. The major change came about in 1872 with the alteration of Musicians of the Orchestra. The original focus of this was the backs of the orchestra as seen by the audience, but Degas added a strip of canvas to the top of his original composition, which switches the focus of the viewer towards the illuminated dancer on stage. Both the and Manet were among the first artists who painted a side of Paris that most of society either did not see or chose to ignore. Therefore, as an abonné himself, it was perhaps a natural progression that Degas turned his focus to the activity behind the stage of the opera house. In these paintings he included a number of recurring themes and characters, not just the dancers, but the abonnés who were ever present watching the dancers. These men were never really given a face, and, in some images, they are represented as a dark shadowed spectre looming on the edge of the room. Along with the abonnés Degas also included the stage mothers who were also present back stage and were there to protect the virtue of the daughters. Although, Lillian Sacharel suggests that this was not always the case and there was a number of novels of the period that suggested that rather than protecting their daughters the stage mothers acted as conduits between the abonnés and the dancers. Although Degas produced black and white prints re-enacting Ludovic Halévy’s Cardinal novels, he did not make the suggestion so obvious in his paintings. Instead the figures are impassive, and the viewer is left to come to their own conclusion regarding the relationships being conveyed.

The abonnés and stage mothers is not immediately obvious in A Group of Dancers. To see them we need to look closer at the mirror which is central in the pictorial space. Degas was a classically trained artist and his initial rehearsal paintings still followed a traditional composition,

but he used the mirror to introduce a different view of the rehearsal room. As George T. M. Shackelford suggest, when discussing The Dace Lesson (1879), the mirror is not just a functional piece of furniture and shows that, although the dancers are grouped in one corner of the room, it is actually a larger space. The mirror in A Group of Dancers acts in the same way showing this is a much bigger space and it also shows another side of what is happening in this scene. The dancers are also grouped in one corner of the with the edge of one dancer's skirt reflected in the mirror, but it also reflects the other side of the room. We can also clearly see the reflection of a window but looking closer we can see a dark shadow standing beside the window. Whether this figure is looking directly at the viewer rather or watching the dancers, is not clear as we cannot see the face of this figure. However, closer inspection also reveals another seated figure, which appears to have their back to the mirror, and the dancers, but facing the shadow figure. There is only an impression of both these figures which leaves their features and gestures unclear. Many of the dancers in the ballet came from working class families who would enrol their daughters in the ballet at a very young age in the hope that they would eventually earn money to support their family. The abonnés, who were wealthy gentlemen, financed the opera house and, therefore, also carried a lot of sway in the acts and ballet sequences that performed. The mothers would approach these gentlemen in the hope that they would sponsor their daughters or in the hope that they would be given a starring role which would mean a higher salary. There have been suggestions that the girls were hired by the patrons to join them in their opera box. Nevertheless, it is left to the viewer to come to their own conclusion what dealings and associations are being reflected in the mirror.

Regardless of what may be represented in the mirror the main subject of this painting are the dancers grouped in the corner of the room. There appears to be five dancers in this group, but only the forms of the dancer on the left and the dancer on the right are clearly represented. The other forms and number of the other dancers are ambiguous. Like the figures in the mirror the dancers are also anonymous as they have no facial features. As Degas wrote in a letter to Bartholomé 'it is essential to do the same subject over again, ten time, a hundred times. Nothing in art must seem to be chance, not even movement'. Therefore, we need to look at why the figures are not clearly represented. In Degas late work he often produced paintings and drawings that were almost identical and in these he showed a similarly anonymous model in different positions. The pastel on tracing paper Dancers (c. 1901), the charcoal drawing Group of Dancers (c. 1901) and the pastel on tracing paper titled Dancers in Green and Yellow (c.1903) are a good example of this repetition. They all feature the same three dancers in an identical series of positions. In each painting and drawing the models are undistinguishable in appearance and whatever features have been represented is repeated on the next models in the sequence. Kendall attributes these to a quote by Baudelaire evidencing that the overlapping of images represented the passage of time. On the other hand this may not be as simple as a visual representation of Baudelaire's words as we know that Degas had also started experimenting with photography around this time and produced paintings and drawings based on photographs. The photograph After the Bath, Woman Drying Her Back (c. 1896) in The Jon Paul Getty Museum and the painting Woman Drying Herself (c. 1895) in the Scottish National Gallery may not have identical poses they are indictive that Degas used photography in the construction of his compositions. This would also suggest that the reason only the left and right dancer in A Group of Dancers are more defined is because this is the first and last position of the model in a photographed ballet sequence.

It is certain though that Degas was interested in the form and movement of these dancers and became fascinated with reproducing the same motif in a variety of mediums. He has used

impasto to show the all the form of the dancers in their various movements. He has notably worked with a combination oil and pastel and with varying tints of paper. This painting is completed in oils alone, but his fingerprints can be seen where he has manipulated the paint by hand. This is also has also been carried out on paper then placed onto a canvas as working on paper rather than canvas would have given more control over the paint to create a similar sfumato affect that would have been achieved using pastels. It is, however, the unconventional composition that makes this painting look like the viewer has chanced upon this scene through an open door way and stopped to watch, but has been caught in the act by the shadowed figure in the mirror. Degas, like Manet, painted scenes and people around Paris that went unnoticed by most of Parisian society. They both painted a number of similarly titled paintings which featured absinth drinkers and audiences of the café-concerts. In these paintings the both show another side of Paris that was only seen by the flaneur, but in a very different way. Where as in Manet's The Absinth Drinker (1859) the viewer is looking directly at the subject who is aware that we are watching. In contrast in Degas painting The Absinth Drinker (c. 1875) the subjects seem completely oblivious to the eyes of the viewer, who is seated in the bottom left hand corner of the frame. This is a composition that was often used by Degas to create an almost voyeuristic view of the scene where the viewer is watching and trying not to be seen by the subjects. What Degas has created here is a brief snapshot of the ballet life.

Degas is more synonymous with his ballet dancer paintings and drawings, of which A Group of Dancers is one of many similar paintings on this theme. However the dancer in themselves is not the sole subject or purpose of the motif. Both Degas and Manet painted similar subjects in absinth drinkers, waitresses, café-concerts and the side of Paris that could only be seen by the flaneur who was always watching and sketching. Although the subjects were the same the approach to how they viewed, and represented, the subjects was quite different. Where Manet would openly watch his subjects, Degas was more secretive in his approach. He intentionally seats the viewer to the left of the picture to create a sense of mystery. Degas approached this composition as he would his photography with a candid picture, which is more natural because it does not have the appearance of being posed. But the addition of the mirror also adds a sense of mystery by showing us the secretive side of the room.