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# Degas at the Races

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Transplanted in France from England in the 1770s, horse racing became a major sporting spectacle in Paris in the 1860s, following the opening of the race track at Longchamp in 1857. Horses, races, jockeys, spectators, and other elements of equestrian culture were favorite subjects of the French Impressionist Edgar Degas (1834-1917). This aspect of his career was the subject of *Degas at the Races*, an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from April 12 to July 12, 1998. Supported by the First Union Corporation, the exhibition featured more than 120 drawings, paintings, pastels, and sculptures from various North American and European galleries and private collections, marking the first time that these pieces have been brought together in a single show.

Spread throughout six rooms of the major exhibition floor of the National Gallery's West Building, *Degas at the Races* features works from Degas' time as a student at the École des Beaux-Art in Paris in the late 1850s to his highly impressionistic and surrealistic period of late 1890s. Each room represents a stage in the chronological development of Degas as an artist, sculptor, and observer of the horse and its milieu. Much like the beauty, discipline, and grace of Degas' otherwise famous ballet series, these works depict a fascination with the horse's role in everyday life, the social spectacle of horse racing, and a sensitive appreciation of the anatomy and athleticism of the animal.

The first room features several charcoal drawings, oils, and sculptures completed during Degas' student years. These pieces illustrate techniques, such as emulating the works of old masters, practiced by aspiring artists. Many of the drawings that depict horses and riders are copies of paintings and frescoes by Italian Renaissance painters. As a student, Degas experimented with history painting, creating images based upon literature, mythology, or historical events. Prominently featured from this genre is *Alexander and Bucephalus* (1859-1861), an oil painting that depicts the legend of Alexander the Great and Bucephalus, a wild stallion. Addressing the theme of man's desire to control nature, the painting

shows Alexander taming the tempestuous steed through ingenuity rather than brute strength. Alexander breaks Bucephalus by shielding his eyes from the sun once he discovers the horse's most crippling vulnerability: the fear of his own shadow. Degas' earliest horse-racing paintings, *At the Races: The Start* (1861-1862) and *Jockeys at Epson* (1861-1862), owe more to the influence of British sporting prints, which were imported to France along with the sport itself, than to actual exposure to the track. In addition to the influence of the British prints, Degas also gained inspiration from the work of the French romantic Theodore Géricault (1791-1824).

The next room features several drawings and paintings of family outings in horse-drawn carriages, children riding ponies, promenades, fox hunts, and races, most of which were based on observations made during Degas' three-week visit to the Normandy estate of his friend Paul Valpinçon during the autumn of 1861. The third room, however, showcases the artist's most ambitious work: *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* (1866). Painted for the Salon, then the most prestigious art exhibition in Paris, *Scene from the Steeplechase* marked Degas' transition from classically inspired history paintings to depictions of subjects drawn from contemporary life, a theme that germinated during his Normandy sojourn. The painting captures the danger and hazard of the steeplechase, a cross-country obstacle race that gained popularity among horse-racing aficionados after the establishment of Society of Steeplechases in 1863. Degas' portrayal of the subject, highly dramatic and authentic, underscores the peril of the race, in which horses often trampled fallen jockeys. Degas was preoccupied by this painting for nearly a quarter-century, and produced several other drawings and studies reflecting the subject matter. It is believed that his younger brother Achille served as model for the fallen jockey. Disappointed by the lack of attention that the painting received at the Salon, Degas reworked the canvas, altered the original composition substantially, and intended to sell the painting to Alexander Cassatt, the brother of American painter Mary Cassatt, in 1880. Dissatisfied with the results of his changes, Degas refused to sell the piece. Moved by the death of his brother in 1893, Degas returned to the painting, eventually producing an entirely new piece, *The Fallen Jockey* (1896-1898), which provided a hauntingly surrealistic counterpoint to the initial elaborate and realistic version.

The years 1866 to 1875, featured in the fourth room of the exhibit, were the most prolific in Degas' painting of the horse and horse racing, and reflect his increased interest and enthusiasm for horse racing as a social spectacle. Often accompanied by his friend and fellow racing enthusiast Edouard Manet, Degas frequently attended fashionable events at Longchamp and other Parisian tracks. Paintings, such as *The Parade* (1866-1872), capture the spontaneity of horse racing while contrasting crowds of spectators with their elegant dress and bright parasols with the casual array of horses and jockeys in the foreground. Unlike most impressionists, who emphasized direct experience from nature and painted in the open air, Degas sketched individual elements in great detail in the field and composed his pictures largely in the studio. During this period, he captured the anatomy and athleticism of the horse with great accuracy and detail. Besides

regular visits to the track, Degas found a new appreciation of equine physical structure and mechanics from his interest in the work of English photographer Eadweard Muybridge (which includes a series of synchronized cameras to record the various phases of the horse's gallop). Muybridge's influence is seen especially in Degas' sculpture, such *Horse Galloping on Right Foot* (1880), which is featured in the fifth room of the exhibit. While the horse is supported entirely by its right foot, the statue anticipates a fact unknown without Muybridge's photographs, that at one point in the sequence of the horse's gallop the animal is momentarily suspended in the air with its legs tucked under its trunk. By the late 1890s, Degas' paintings of the horse become increasingly abstract and surreal, as seen in the final room. Degas abandons equestrian subjects entirely by the turn of the century, and devotes his brush to private and intimate portrayals of dancers and bathers.

The Degas exhibit illustrates a chapter in French sports history that has been examined only nominally by sport scholars. Richard Holt devotes a few informative pages to horse racing in his book *Sport and Society in Modern France*. Holt's brief discussion emphasizes the sport's social stratification and mechanisms, such as fine and flamboyant clothing, an enclosed spectator's gallery, and exclusive organizations, which enforced the physical separation of the "fashionable racegoers . . . from the punters."<sup>1</sup> Degas' paintings deftly capture the social character of horse racing described by Holt. The enclosed gallery of well-dressed spectators provides the backdrop for an excited thoroughbred race in *The False Start* (1869-1872). Much of the history of horse racing in France, however, lies buried in French primary and secondary sources, many of which Kimberly Jones, assistant curator of French painting at the National Gallery of Art, consulted for an historical essay in the exhibit catalogue and a public lecture on French artists and horse racing in the nineteenth century? One aspect of the sport, not featured explicitly in the exhibit but one that contributed much to its public success, was the *pari-mutuel* betting system. Developed by Pierre Oller, a Parisian chemist and perfume merchant, in 1865, *pari-mutuel* permitted gamblers to pool their money and split the balance after the track took a five-percent commission. *Parimutuel* became the only legal form of race betting in France and, in the 1870s, had spread throughout the horse tracks of Europe and the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

As a source for the sports scholar, *Degas at the Races* provides much more than an assortment of drawings, paintings, and sculptures. The exhibit reveals much about the importance and place of the horse and horse racing in late nineteenth-century French society. Holt's social history of sports in modern France leaves one with the impression that sports, such as bullfighting, cockfighting, and cycling, provided late nineteenth-century French men and women with excitement, peril, and risk: feelings otherwise missing from their predictable, everyday lives. Although Holt does not include horse racing among these exhilarating activities, the sport provides an element of danger and surprise for the jockey and spectator, not to mention the anticipation of collecting a fortune or suffering a loss at the betting window. Degas' paintings suggest that the restoration of this kind of physical and emotional excitement through equine sport and recreation was important for late nineteenth-century French society.

1. Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1981),
2. Kimberly Jones, "A Brief History of Horse Racing in France," in Jean Sutherland Boggs, *Degas at the Races* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 208-225; and *A Day at the Races: French Artists and the Racing World of the Nineteenth Century*, East Building Auditorium, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, June 28, 1998.
3. William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, Revised Edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 176.