

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

BEACH SCENE
HILAIRE-GERMAIN-EDGAR
DEGAS



'BEACH SCENE' BY HILAIRE-GERMAIN-EDGAR DEGAS (1834 - 1917)



The picture is 47 x 82.6 cm. It was painted in oils on paper, mounted on canvas, in 1868–77.

These notes and a large print of Degas's 'Beach Scene' are for primary teachers attending the one-day course **Expanding Horizons** at the National Gallery during 2003/4. Cross-curricular work produced in schools as a result of one of these courses will be shown in an exhibition at the National Gallery in 2005 as part of the Gallery's **Take One Picture** project.

In these notes you will find: information about the painting; information about the artist; suggestions for classroom activities; curriculum links.

Take One Picture is generously supported by Mr and Mrs Christoph Henkel.

What is the painting about?

Degas shows a beach with a woman who is probably a nursemaid combing the hair of a young girl. The girl rests her head on a white towel. She has just changed out of her swimming costume and it lies on the right of the painting, together with a green parasol. In the background, a group of figures wrapped in towels are on the extreme left. Next to them, a woman out walking her dog meets a man in a brown suit, while on the right we can see figures swimming in the sea.

This painting was actually made in the artist's studio, not on the beach at all, and there are clues to this. For instance, we see puffs of smoke from two ships on the horizon going in opposite directions, which wouldn't be possible in nature. And the carefully arranged clothing in the foreground does not suggest the informality of the beach. Degas himself said, when asked how he managed to paint this out of doors: 'It was quite simple. I spread my flannel vest on the floor of the studio, and had the model sit on it. You see, the air you breathe in a painting is not necessarily the same as the air out of doors.'

Degas was interested throughout his life in women combing their hair, or having their hair combed for them. In this painting, the nursemaid attends to the ritual with great care and attention. The child's whole face is not visible, only her profile, and the rather flat nose and protruding jaw give her an animal-like appearance. Her clothing, with the striped blouse and dark skirt, is typical for children at this date, when the body was carefully covered up. The white parasol serves to provide further protection from the sun: sunbathing and tanning did not become fashionable until about 50 years after this painting was made. The fact that the nursemaid does not wear a hat and is not covered by a parasol suggests that she is of a different social class from the girl.

Degas greatly admired the art of the past, and for this picture he had been looking at earlier paintings of allegorical or biblical subjects, including the theme of Samson and Delilah, where the sleeping Samson has his hair cut by Delilah and loses his power. This painting is different in showing a child, and the hair is being combed, not cut, but there is a link in the strong attraction and significance that hair has.

The painting uses oil paint applied to paper. This gives it a smooth finish, with no surface texture. The three pieces of paper were stuck together, and the joins are quite visible, especially at the left. They were then mounted on canvas. This is an unconventional approach, but one which is typical of Degas. The three sections make it resemble both a triptych, a three-panel Christian altarpiece, and three-part Japanese woodblock prints. Japanese prints were much admired in France at this time, and often include both beach scenes and images of women having their hair combed.

Who was the artist?

Degas was born in Paris in 1834, and died there in 1917. He was fascinated by ballet, and many of his most famous pictures are of this subject – the dancers, the rehearsals, the performances. He also loved horses and horseracing, and made many pictures of the races. He was one of the founder members of the Impressionist group, although he differed from painters like Monet and Renoir in preferring not to paint landscapes, and in making frequent references to the art of the past. He was a great believer in exhibitions controlled by the artists themselves, and used the Impressionist exhibitions to showcase his work. This painting, which was probably begun in 1868, was shown at the third Impressionist exhibition in 1877, one of over 20 paintings. Degas was very experimental in his approach, and he often reworked paintings years after he had begun them. He may have added touches to this work when he exhibited it, some nine years after he started it. The painting was bought by one of his artist friends, Henri Rouart, at that exhibition.

Why was it painted?

This is the start of Degas's preoccupation with the theme of combing hair. He painted it in response to his friends Edouard Manet and Berthe Morisot making beach paintings at about the same date. Visiting the seaside was becoming a fashionable activity, made easier for Parisians by the growth of the railways, and many images of this time record visits to the beach. The girl and her nursemaid are probably professional models, rather than portraits of individuals Degas knew. Another painting of young peasant girls jumping in the surf was shown at the same exhibition, and makes a contrast to this painting in its physical energy and informality.

Using the picture in the classroom

At the end of the **Expanding Horizons** course you will be given a large print of Degas's 'Beach Scene'. This can be displayed in the classroom, perhaps with a graffiti wall next to it for students to record their thoughts. You could also provide a magnifying glass to encourage closer inspection and a set of coloured filters (acetates) to explore the relationship between colour and mood. Alternatively the image can be accessed via the National Gallery website (www.nationalgallery.org.uk) for use with an interactive whiteboard or on individual PCs. The virtual image is zoomable, allowing students to focus on very small details in the painting.

As a result of participating in the project it is hoped that students and teachers will be inspired to visit the National Gallery to enjoy the original painting. With this in mind, introduce the concept of the 'original' with the students by talking about the difference between a printed reproduction, a virtual image and a unique painting. The most effective way of introducing the content of a picture is a discussion in which students' own perceptions and opinions are encouraged. Students will probably be unfamiliar with the painting. With the aim of developing their visual literacy skills, allow them space to try and work out what is happening in the picture. Discussions can be started with questions such as:

- What time of the year is it?
- What is the weather like?
- Where might the place be?
- Does it look like a good place to go on holiday?
- Are there any clues in the painting to suggest that it was painted over 100 years ago?

Using Degas's 'Beach Scene' across the National Curriculum

Enriching the primary curriculum by linking different subject areas to a painting is a creative approach that has been recognised as good practice by the Minister for Education and Skills, the Rt. Hon. Charles Clarke.

Desired learning outcomes from using art across the curriculum include:

- Knowledge and Understanding: increased understanding of connections between subjects.
- Skills: increased ability to work with others; being involved in class, whole school, community and national events.
- Attitudes and Values: increased self-esteem enabling all students to succeed.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity: fulfilment and satisfaction from achievements; providing an environment where pupils feel confident to work beyond planned experiences.

Some suggestions

Literacy & Communication

- Produce a soundtrack for the painting, including conversations between different groups of people.
- Using words and pictures, produce a visual diary of a real or imaginary journey.
- Read texts that focus on hair, for example the Old Testament story of Samson and Delilah, or the fairytale about Rapunzel.

Numeracy

Identify and describe 2D shapes.

Make profile portraits of members of the class, carefully measuring areas on the face and scaling them down on paper.

Art/ICT

- Using enquiry skills, ask students to find clues that prove the picture was painted in the studio rather than on the beach.
- Monet's painting 'The Beach at Trouville' (1870) was painted 'au plein air' (out of doors). Compare Degas's 'Beach Scene' with Monet's picture using the zoomable images on the National Gallery website, www.nationalgallery.org.uk

History

- Investigate how wider access to transport affected the lives of 19th-century people.
- Make an historical enquiry into the history of either swimwear or childrenswear.

Science

- Explore the properties of materials suitable for swimwear, towels and summer clothes.
- Investigate the properties of the sun, including the health risks involved in sunbathing.