DEGAS THROUGH HIS OWN EYES


Reviewed by Amy Ione, The Diatrope Institute, P.O. Box 6813, Santa Rosa, CA 95406-0813, U.S.A. E-mail: <ione@diatrope.com>.

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834–1917) once said that he was convinced that differences in vision are of no importance to the artist. Rather, in his view, inner vision determined the nature of an artist’s work. This seems like an ironic statement when we consider the visual difficulties that plagued him throughout his life. Engaging with Degas’s actual visual situation, as Michael Marmor does in Degas Through His Own Eyes, allows us to think through Degas’s case and to better place him in terms of his time. As he was an Impressionist, it is easy to characterize the artist’s eyes as a striking example of how vision is part of both the nature of an artist’s work and the degree to which an artist’s creative ends are achieved. Marmor effectively brings an ophthalmologist onto the scene to examine Degas’s visual disabilities in clinical terms. His book is also a welcome addition to the literature in this area. The most useful chapter, “Seeing Art with Blurred Vision,” simulates how Degas would have seen his own work as his eyes deteriorated over time. Looking at Degas’s late work, Marmor also gives a lucid account of how some of the features that appear bizarre to the viewer might have appeared appropriately conceived to the artist. Here, too, the reproductions allow Marmor to clinically explain his analysis to the non-specialist. The illustrations of blur during the technical summary and when examining Degas’s work are a powerful component in the book.

Pages in which we are shown how a single image would look at 20/20, 20/60, 20/100 and 20/200 offer information that is hard to conceptualize without images. Equally compelling are comparisons of early and late pieces in which Degas uses similar motifs. For example, Marmor compares lines and textures found in highly refined early images of dancers (The Dancing Lesson, 1871–1874; The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the Rue Le Peletier, 1872) with looser and more expressive later works (The Blue Dancers, 1890; and Russian Dancers, 1899). Still, upon finishing the book, I felt that I understood Degas’s condition more than I did the pathos that no doubt accompanied the need to adjust to pronounced physical changes. Nor does this survey encourage us to ask to what degree the artist might have been utilizing his failing vision toward artistic ends. In addition, even though the visual loss was optical in nature, the book does not seem to encourage us to reflect on whether a sense of mist and aura might also have been something Degas wanted to capture in the paintings.

One valuable component Marmor does include is a summary of artists with known visual disorders. As the author explains, failing capabilities are not unique to Degas. Other artists who are often mentioned when this topic is introduced include Rembrandt, Titian, Monet and Cézanne. Monet, for example, had cataracts that significantly interfered with his work from 1920 to 1925. It is said that his visual acuity had fallen to 20/200 at one point. Yet after surgery, when his eyesight improved markedly, he reworked many of the

Generally it is agreed that Degas had a condition called retinopathy. He first noticed poor vision in his right eye at the age of 36, when he found he could not aim a rifle during the Franco-Prussian War. We know this realization dates from the early 1870s because of letters Degas wrote while in New Orleans, in which he wrote about weakness in his eye and an inability to read and write. Since there are no known measurements of Degas’s acuity, Marmor uses four sources to make estimates: historical records of correspondence, personal remembrances, the shading of lines in Degas’s art, and Degas’s handwriting. Marmor also summarizes the key details of Degas’s life in terms of his paintings and works on paper. As he explains, the precision we encounter in the early work is extraordinary, as is the roughness of many of Degas’s later pieces, which are often done in larger formats. The quotations from his letters and friends are the most compelling evidence of the anomalous condition.

Fulil recognizing the degree to which a visual artist depends on visual analyses when constructing a work, Marmor aids us in connecting stylistic trends of Impressionism with Degas’s physical capabilities. His book is also a welcome addition to the literature connecting visual science with visual art. It is not just that Marmor demonstrates intersections between art and science, he also shows a knack for finding ways to bring the reader into the discussion experientially, which makes Degas Through His Own Eyes more than a descriptive analysis. I was, for example, impressed by the selections Marmor chose first to demonstrate visual acuity in general and the subsequent application of the computer-simulated examples to Degas’s experience. Reproduced examples of variations effectively transformed the words into a conceptual grasp of each point introduced. Indeed, on closing the book, I felt the visuals had allowed me to embody how Degas’s eyes deteriorated as he aged. The visuals also convincingly make the point that Degas himself did not recognize the degree to which his deteriorating eyesight changed his work.

What I liked most about the book was Marmor’s highly original approach. He effectively brings an ophthalmologist’s eye to art without losing sight of the degree to which an artist’s creative process includes more than just the eyes. We are reminded that cultural context, changing styles and visual acuity all influence an artist’s oeuvre. Marmor’s ability to aid the reader in “seeing” how one might clinically assess Degas’s visual disabilities in clinical terms is a distinctive contribution to the literature in this area. The most useful chapter, “Seeing Art with Blurred Vision,” simulates how Degas would have seen his own work as his eyes deteriorated over time. Looking at Degas’s late work, Marmor also gives a lucid account of how some of the features that appear bizarre to the viewer might have appeared appropriately conceived to the artist. Here, too, the reproductions allow Marmor to clinically explain his analysis to the non-specialist. The illustrations of blur during the technical summary and when examining Degas’s work are a powerful component in the book.
gradually come to understand, are as easily creating certain “facts” as they are hiding certain others from public view. Misters Bush and Blair “know for a fact” that the former Iraqi regime was producing and hiding weapons of mass destruction, and it is a well-known “fact” that man never walked on the moon. Yes, Elvis lives. As a matter of fact, I have met him at a recovery center in the South of France where Princess Di has gone into hiding, too.

Facts are no longer facts, it appears, but how did they ever become facts in the first place? What does this overworked four-letter word—derived from the Latin “factum,” or “man-made thing”—really stand for? When was it used and what were the events or pieces of information that received this seemingly untouchable label? Who elevated mere descriptions, stories, anecdotes and gossip to the semisacred position of the undeniable, solid and foolproof status of factual evidence?

Barbara Shapiro, a professor of history in the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, traces the early history of the concept of “fact” in the United Kingdom in the 16th and 17th centuries. It started in the courts, when juries and judges were urged by early modern thinkers to ground their verdicts on facts as witnessed by reliable and trustworthy observers. Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon—he himself a professional lawyer—among many other lesser-known philosophers, contributed to the advancement of the “fact” in the legal arena, although it may come as a surprise that they thought gentlemen to be more reliable than commoners and men more trustworthy than women.

In a matter of decades the concept gradually spread from law to historiography, chorography and travel reporting. By the end of the 16th century, reporters of “marvels,” “wonders” and other “news” in the periodical press had adopted the practice of quoting witnesses and their antecedents to support the factual status of their stories. With the founding and the development of the Royal Society, “facts” became part and parcel of scientific discourse. Finally, at the beginning of the 18th century, the use of the word had become so common in English culture that it appeared even in religious texts.

Barbara Shapiro has taken the work of Shapin and Shaffer (see Levathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life [1985]), a landmark work on the development of early scientific thought and on the societal nature of science and knowledge) to heart and clearly demonstrates how the fact originated in law, not in science, and how this epistemological concept moved from one realm to the other, reshaping the structure of knowledge in its wake. She does so in eight thematically arranged chapters rather than one chronologically ordered narrative, giving enough side information for the reader to get the complete picture. Shapiro draws from a truly formidable range of references, appropriately organized in the footnotes to keep the prose clear and readable, and she strikes a balance between “factual” description and epistemological interpretation. This makes the book a good read for both historians and amateurs—in the modern sense—of intellectual and cultural history.

**AN EPODOTAL THEORY**


Reviewed by Stefaan Van Ryssen, Hogeschool Gent, Jan Delvinlaan 115, 9000 Gent, Belgium. E-mail: <stefaan.vanryssen@pandora.be>.

Jane Gallop is a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Along with some books on feminist literary theory in the deconstructivist tradition, she has also published Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, describing and analyzing an intriguing episode of her campus life when she was accused of harassment by two of her failing students. The accusation came to nothing—obviously the students had wanted to take revenge on her—but it left a bitter mark on Gallop’s life and perhaps a blemish on her career.

This “anecdote,” as Gallop herself calls it, is central to the first half of this book of nine essays. This time, however, it is not the story itself that gets the emphasis but the way it is treated in several texts. The author has left the facts behind her to concentrate on what might be learned from the way the facts are dealt with. The way theory is constructed (!) by means of the deconstruction of the anecdote is what interests her. And she constructs her theory with wit and elegance.

A CULTURE OF FACT: ENGLAND, 1550–1720


Reviewed by Stefaan Van Ryssen, Hogeschool Gent, Jan Delvinlaan 115, 9000 Gent, Belgium. E-mail: <stefaan.vanryssen@pandora.be>.

Over the past decades, critical observers and suspicious citizens have learned to mistrust reports about the facts of military campaigns, corporate irresponsibility, royal mishaps and scientific success. The media, we have