

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

At The Café by Edgar Degas



Title:	At The Café
Maker:	Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	c. 1877-80
Dimensions:	h. 65.7 x w. 54.6 cm
Museum No:	2387
Gallery:	5

Key Dates for Degas

1834	Born Paris into rich Franco-Italian banking family
1847	Mother dies
1853	Abandons his law studies to take up painting
1854	Studies with Louis Lamothe who was a disciple of Ingres. Conventional training. Makes first of several trips to Italy to study Old Masters
1855	Meets Ingres
1862	Meets Edouard Manet
mid 1860s	Turns to modern themes, particularly contemporary Parisian life
late 1860s	Uses jockeys and racehorses as subject matter
1860s	Series of portraits
1870	Serves in Franco-Prussian War - damage to eyesight
Early 1870	First ballet subjects
1872	Visits relatives in New Orleans
1874	Father dies leaving vast debts. Helps organise first Impressionist exhibition
1874-86	Takes part in seven of the eight Impressionist exhibitions showing works of themes of dancers and scenes from the Paris Opéra, milliners and laundresses
1875-77	PAINTS AT THE CAFÉ
1894	Dreyfus scandal - Degas found himself marginalized from many longstanding liberal friends because of his right wing and anti-Semitic views
1909-11	Stops work completely because of failing eyesight
1917	Dies in Paris

The fact that Degas took part in seven of the eight Impressionist exhibitions would seem to place him at the very heart of this group of artists and yet in some ways he was different. His paintings and drawings of women from 1870 onwards show ordinary women involved in everyday tasks. Although not formally posed as a portrait, the individuals in each work are very much the subject. As Robert Hughes in *The Shock of the New* says:

'Around 1870, the field of paintable pleasure dramatically widened. Impressionism found its subjects in pleasures which nearly everyone above the poverty line could have; and it extracted the images of pleasure directly from the lives of the painters themselves, and of their friends. Renoir and Monet, Sisley and Caillebotte, Degas and Pissarro were very different artists and they saw the world in different ways, not only technically, but morally as well: there is a great distance between Renoir's pink jeune filles en fleur, for instance, and the cool realistic scrutiny with which Degas took in the world of women's work, at the barre of the Opéra or over an ironing-table'.

This is one of a number of scenes of women in cafés which Degas represented in paintings, drawings and prints between 1875 and 1877. The best known of these is *L'Absinthe*, painted in 1876 which is now in the Musée d'Orsay. The fact that the women in *At The Café* are unaccompanied in a public place suggests that they are prostitutes. However the questions of who and where they are, and what they are doing do not seem to be the aspects of this scene that most intrigued Degas. What he seems to be concerned to convey is the very personal and perhaps troubled nature of their conversation. Given the emotional intensity of these two women, the handling of the oil paint is almost a contradiction. The way he has shown gesture and expression is very economical and implies that he was working at speed, directly observing these women in the café. Yet in his symbolic use of colour, his positioning of the figures, the way that one looks at the other whilst the other's eyes are downcast all make the viewer feel as though we are intruding on a private and intense discussion.

At this time Degas also produced a remarkable series of monotypes, many heightened with pastel which also showed prostitutes in cafés or in brothels. In one of these, *Women on the Terrace at a Café, Evening*, now in the Art Institute of Chicago, Degas also shows two women in conversation, one of whose faces is obscured by a pillar.