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## Parsing Edgar Degas's *Le Pédicure*

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Abstract:

In his strange and arresting painting *Le Pédicure* of 1873, Edgar Degas represents his lethargic young niece slumped on a banquette as her toe is ministered to by a balding chiropodist. Commonly interpreted as a representation of luxury and indulgence, this painting is more productively understood through examination of its profoundly troubling and melancholy qualities. Reading the image with an awareness of the ways in which it articulates the nuanced language of family helps us to begin to contemplate, rather than overlook, new aspects of *Le Pédicure* that are distressingly odd.

## Parsing Edgar Degas's *Le Pédicure* by Marni Reva Kessler

The silvery wink of the instrument wielded by the male figure in Edgar Degas's *Le Pédicure* of 1873 (fig. 1) draws our eye to the focus of the painting, to the place where this middle-aged man works on the toe of a drowsy young girl who is slumped on a chintz banquette. Representing the artist's ten-year-old American niece Joe Balfour,<sup>[1]</sup> *Le Pédicure* surprises in both its subject matter and Degas's handling of it. Looking at the spot where the sharp tool meets Joe's youthful flesh, we might wonder why Degas wanted to represent something so unpleasant. We may even experience a quick shiver of disgust as we take in what appears to be happening in the image: the man is in the process of lifting the edge of Joe's toenail from her skin by passing the steely instrument between the two. Despite its subject matter, the painting still draws us in with its comfortable domestic setting, its plush banquette, marble-topped bureau, gilt-framed mirror, pitcher, and thick-lipped blue and white washbowl. The sumptuous color and texture of the green background wall, the sharp slant of light from the unseen window at the right, the voluptuous spill of white fabric, and the earnest tilt of the man's head as he leans over Joe's foot also serve as soothing counterpoints to the more disconcerting features of the painting.



Fig. 1, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Le Pédicure*, 1873. Essence on paper mounted on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Identified by some scholars as the depiction of a privileged girl having a pedicure or her toenails trimmed by a trained medical professional, *Le Pédicure* has been misunderstood as a charming image of bourgeois luxury.<sup>[2]</sup> The consistent mistranslation of its title as *The Pedicure* is partially to blame for interpretations that impose twentieth-century ideas about lavishness and indulgence onto a picture that, I will suggest, has little do with either. Translated from late nineteenth-century French into English, "*le pédicure*" is not "the pedicure," but rather "the chiropodist," which in this painting refers to the balding male figure who attends to a girl's toe.<sup>[3]</sup> Analysis of this painting, thus, must address the chiropodist who, I will show, could only have been a paramedical type who performed minor procedures or a common quack. That the central figure is a child may also explain the general propensity to see the sweetness of the painting rather than its perplexing oddities. As Marcia Pointon has argued, we tend to negate complexity when analyzing images of children because: "Children are understood to be

simple, uncomplicated subjects to which our common humanity gives us ready access.”<sup>[4]</sup> In my reading, Degas’s focus on a child, one who is a member of his own family, renders *Le Pédicure* all the more dense, somehow at once sorrowful, unsettling, and strikingly touching. Tensions perforate the veneer of propriety that stretches thin across the surface of the painting. That *Le Pédicure* is a family picture, one that I hope to establish held distinct significance for the artist, helps us to understand its strangeness and conflict as connected to the intricate, emotional, and convoluted discourse of family. I will thus offer in these pages an analysis that historically contextualizes *Le Pédicure* and its unusual subject—a chiropodist performing a procedure on a child’s toenail—and also parses the painting *vis-à-vis* the complicated mix of family life that Degas encountered when he left his existence as a bachelor in Paris to live temporarily with his long-deceased mother’s relatives in Louisiana. And by doing so, I will show that an essential mournfulness shadows this odd yet tender painting.

### Family Visit

*Le Pédicure* was conceived and likely completed during Degas’s five-month stay with his mother’s Creole family in her native New Orleans from October 1872 to February 1873.<sup>[5]</sup> He had already come to know several of these relatives well when his Aunt Odile, her daughters Désirée and Estelle, and Estelle’s infant daughter Joe came to Bourg-en-Bresse, in southeastern France, for two years in 1863 to escape the daily struggles of living in Union-occupied New Orleans during the American Civil War. He developed a particularly close bond with Estelle, then a depressed war widow whose husband had been killed in battle in 1862.<sup>[6]</sup> Even after she married Degas’s brother René in 1869, the artist’s devotion to her remained steadfast.<sup>[7]</sup> In fact, Degas did not speak with his brother for fifteen years after René left Estelle for another woman in 1878.<sup>[8]</sup> It is probably because of Degas’s loving feelings towards Estelle that, despite the persistent eye ailments that surfaced shortly before his journey to America, he nevertheless made the arduous voyage. Plagued by a blind spot in one eye and by severe light sensitivity in both, he had a unique empathy for Estelle, who herself suffered from what was then called ophthalmia, a progressive eye disease that led to her becoming completely blind by 1875.<sup>[9]</sup>

Degas’s own eye concerns, which were exacerbated by the bright sunlight of Louisiana, forced him to work indoors during his visit. In his letters to friends in Paris, he expressed the difficulty of having to limit himself to painting only inside and almost exclusively members of his family. On November 19, 1872, Degas complained to James Tissot:

Nothing is as difficult as doing family portraits. To make a cousin sit for you who is feeding an imp of two months is quite hard work. To get young children to pose on the steps is another job of work which doubles the fatigue of the first.<sup>[10]</sup>

To Danish painter and designer Lorenz Frølich, Degas penned on November 27, 1872:

My eyes are much better. I work little, it is true, although on difficult things. Some family portraits, they must be done to the taste of the family, in impossible light, very interrupted, with models who are full of affection but a little too familiar and take you a lot less seriously because you are their nephew or their cousin.<sup>[11]</sup>

And in a letter to Henri Rouart dated December 5, 1872, Degas explained: “The light is so strong that I have not yet been able to do anything on the river. My eyes are so greatly in need

of care that I scarcely take any risk with them at all. A few family portraits will be the sum total of my efforts.”<sup>[12]</sup> While it is not surprising that Degas included information about subject matter and working conditions in letters to friends and fellow artists, it is significant that he dwelled specifically on the difficulties of having to paint mostly what he called “family portraits” while in New Orleans.<sup>[13]</sup> He recognized that his work had to conform to the taste of family members even as he was frustrated by the challenge of being taken seriously by, and having the undivided attention of, his relatives as they sat for him. One senses in Degas’s words both his resignation and his keen understanding of the complex negotiations necessitated by familial relationships, particularly when those relationships morph into “portrait encounters.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Some scholars have rejected the term “portrait” to characterize *Le Pédicure* and instead have categorized it as a genre scene.<sup>[15]</sup> To my mind, though, the image fits squarely with Degas’s descriptions in his letters to friends and family in Paris of the “family portraits”—paintings of relatives sitting quietly or engaged with the tasks of everyday life—which occupied his time in New Orleans. This picture’s subject, the artist’s niece lying still as her toe is tended to by a chiropodist, might initially seem like an unusual one for Degas, but it makes sense in the context of this visit since the scene afforded him a relatively motionless and uncomplaining family member in an indoor setting, which, in turn, also gave him the ability to control the intense Louisiana sunlight that was so difficult for him to manage.

The theme of *Le Pédicure* had other advantages for Degas. I cannot help but speculate that Joe may have conjured for the artist a link to his own mother, Célestine Musson Degas, as a child, growing up in this very place. The act of painting this girl of New Orleans may thus be seen as both an exploration and an excavation, for by representing Joe, Degas is on some level perhaps also reaching back and into layers of history in order to fill in the pieces of another narrative, the one for which he longed, the one in which he could envision his mother’s own childhood. In this sense, Degas is not unlike an adult Roland Barthes who, upon pouring through a box of youthful photographs of his recently-deceased mother, mournfully proclaims: “That is what the time when my mother was alive *before me is*.”<sup>[16]</sup> By painting Joe, Degas was constructing not just an image of his niece, but also a fantasized though irreconcilable past for the American mother who died when he was thirteen.<sup>[17]</sup>

That this work had multi-layered personal resonance for Degas is also suggested by another fact. Whereas the focus of most of his other canvases from New Orleans is upon a woman alone, the business of this one allowed him to explore a form of physical contact between two figures, a contact of the sort that one might even associate with maternal comfort. But touch here is tinged with an unexpected nuance. Though superficially decorous, even parental, the relationship between Joe and the man in *Le Pédicure* is faintly troubling, especially when considered *vis-à-vis* certain aspects of the painting itself and the historical context of late nineteenth-century American and French chiropody that I will describe. We could, of course, simply understand this picture as being part of Degas’s continued attempt to keep his working life alive, despite poor health, during a difficult and long family visit. But, as I hope to show, that which is most profound in *Le Pédicure* may also be the most puzzling and conflicted elements in it, those aspects of the painting that nudge it past the limits of contemporary bourgeois modesty and the decency we tend to associate with family portraits. Indeed, the proverbial knife cuts both ways in this peculiar, yet riveting, painting. Perhaps it is the way that

propriety and impropriety seem to intersect at the blunt junction where the chiropodist's glimmering instrument meets Joe's tender flesh that makes this canvas so mesmerizing. That the girl, though covered by a white sheet, is not dressed and is semi-conscious may also cause us to pause, to question whether the circumstances warranted her disrobing and why Degas, by including her discarded dress—a flourish of lavender pigment at the top edge of the banquette—would make that situation so blatant. We expect to see something less unsettling in a painting by an uncle of a beloved niece. The façade of respectability has been loosened just enough to lead us to wonder why this family image eschews certain rules of late nineteenth-century decorum.

### Picturing Family

Examining *Le Pédicure* through the lens of recent scholarship on family photographs<sup>[18]</sup> helps us to contemplate the facets of Degas's enigmatic representation that are disquieting and odd. So, before setting the painting within its social historical context, I want first to consider the broader conceptualization of family and family pictures as they have been theorized in contiguous fields of study. Indeed, we learn from this scholarship that the very places where we might reasonably expect to find solace and contentment—in the family itself and its visual representation—may also be sites of anxiety, sadness, and discontent. Family as a reality and a model is neither constant nor static. Rather, family is a socially, ideologically, personally, and historically constructed entity, one that, to use Marianne Hirsch's words, "is structured by desire and disappointment, love and loss."<sup>[19]</sup> Family is inherently contingent, a site of relational intricacies that often also reinforce certain binary tendencies of human feeling. We may, for example, at once love and hate, find refuge in and be distressed by family. Representations of it can thus be burdened with and determined by especially thorny vulnerabilities and reverberations. In her pioneering work on family photographs, particularly as they relate to the Holocaust, loss, trauma, and memory, Hirsch has eloquently established what she calls "the politics of familial representation,"<sup>[20]</sup> the intangible, though profoundly emotional, systems that define how we both depict our relatives and look at images of them. Pictures of family, she contends, are uniquely conditional and inscribed by distinct conscious and unconscious motivations. Though her concern is with the medium of photography, Hirsch's argument that representations of family are fraught in ways that images of non-family members simply are not is indispensable for attempting to untangle the deep workings of a painting like *Le Pédicure*.

Images of family, Hirsch maintains, are the products of an exceptionally loaded set of circumstances, all of which are themselves entrenched in some of the most fundamental human emotions like love, grief, longing, guilt, sadness, and anger. As such, family pictures may be generated by a multitude of feelings and require a particular kind of analysis, one that acknowledges what Hirsch calls the "familial gaze."<sup>[21]</sup> She explains:

When we photograph ourselves in a familial setting, we do not do so in a vacuum; we respond to dominant mythologies of family life, to conceptions we have inherited. . . . These internalized images reflect back on us, deploying a familial gaze that fixes and defines us. But each picture is also the product of other looks and gazes as family members define themselves in relation to each other in the roles they occupy as mother, father, daughter, son, husband, lover. That process of definition—the familial act of looking—is also recorded visually in photographs. And, as these looks and gazes intersect, they are filtered by various screens that define what and how we might see.<sup>[22]</sup>

If we extrapolate from this statement about the idiosyncratic nature of family photographs, we can appreciate something of Degas's "familial gaze" and the "dominant mythologies of family life," the uniquely intricate tangle of emotions and provocations that may inform *Le Pédicure*.

There were six other children in the Balfour/Musson/Degas households in 1873,<sup>[23]</sup> but Degas chose to paint Joe, whom he knew from the time she was an infant.<sup>[24]</sup> We can only speculate regarding the possible psychological reasons for this choice; however, Joe's mother, Estelle, was the niece of—and thus a direct tie to—Degas's own mother, who would have been close to Estelle's age when she died in 1847. In her published reminiscences of her Uncle Edgar, Jeanne Fèvre writes of the profound connection she perceived among the artist, his mother, and her native New Orleans:

Often . . . he heard his mother, for whom he had a veritable adoration, speak about her country [*sic*], New Orleans, with real nostalgia. Little by little the desire was born in Degas to go one day and visit this country that was a little his own through his mother.  
<sup>[25]</sup>

We can imagine that New Orleans would have been intimately linked for Degas to his mother and her wistful talk of her natal city. If we are to believe Jeanne Fèvre, his mother's recollections inspired Degas to want one day to see her birthplace, which also, to paraphrase Fèvre, felt a little like it was his own. New Orleans, for Degas, must have been saturated with memories—both real and imagined—of his mother, nostalgia for his own childhood with her, and a sense of longing, and the paintings—*Le Pédicure* chief among them—he created while there appear to have held particularly profound significance for him. The fact that, despite requests from his aunt and cousins, Degas took all of the paintings he made of them during his visit back to France when he returned home in 1873, suggests that the pictures were deeply meaningful to him.

Acknowledging the many ways in which *Le Pédicure* participates in a swirl of family and all that this would have implied for Degas, helps us to begin to comprehend some of the conscious and unconscious drives that may elucidate the artist's decision to represent such a disconcerting theme, a listless child positioned on a banquette as the edge of her toenail is pried from skin by a chiropodist. *Le Pédicure*, in both subject matter and execution, is made thick by its interlaced threads of family, loss, pain, sadness, and melancholy.<sup>[26]</sup> This picture is haunted by the past and the future, by family both alive and dead. It seems to refer back to the artist's deceased mother as much as it looks toward his own imminent departure from New Orleans, from the relatives he knew he would never again see. A keepsake from Degas's trip, one that would remain in his possession for over twenty years, this painting, I contend, mourns<sup>[27]</sup> what he is about to leave behind at the same time that it is inscribed by grief for who is already lost.

Though conceptually and materially disparate from a photograph, *Le Pédicure* nevertheless approaches the condition of the photographic in its distinctive exploration of loss, melancholy, and mournfulness, qualities we have come to associate particularly with photography. *Le Pédicure* may even be understood as a kind of painted manifestation of Susan Sontag's famous assertion regarding the ways in which the photograph prefigures the absence of its subject and is always already marked by the portent of loss: "All photographs are *memento*

*mori*. . . All photographs testify to time's relentless melt."<sup>[28]</sup> Sontag encapsulates the unique workings of the photographic image, how its very essence produces mournfulness for the thing that will never be again. Despite the painting's inevitable inability to index that which it represents in the technological way a photograph can, I nevertheless want to propose a reading of *Le Pédicure* that considers the possibility of a certain kind of indexicality, something that, to borrow from Roland Barthes, we might call a *ça-a été*, a "that-has-been"-ness for the painting.<sup>[29]</sup> I am not suggesting that *Le Pédicure* proves that Joe and the chiropodist really did at one point in time assume these poses. But I do think that the scene, however imagined or fabricated, offers some visual "proof," if you will, some material evidence of his family for Degas at the same time that the painting articulates the irretrievable approaching loss of that family, an echo of Degas's first loss, the death of his mother. There is something of memory and love, grief and sorrow to this image, which is both touching and unsettling. It engages the extreme emotions associated with family and the absence of it that is created through the passage of time, geographic distance, and death, and this understanding may help to explain some of *Le Pédicure*'s eccentricities, the ways in which it veers—even if Degas did not consciously intend for this to happen—towards being somewhat disturbing and strange. The troublingly lackluster child, covered only by a length of cloth, contradicts what we expect to see in an image of a person so young.<sup>[30]</sup> And the adult chiropodist, with his dark suit, balding pate, and glistening instrument, wrenches us even further from the possibility of seeing the uncomplicated and pleasant luxury that others have read into the painting.

### The Chiropodist

Scholar of American literature Christopher Benfey has thus far offered the most comprehensive and contextual analysis of *Le Pédicure*, and his work provides an excellent foundation for my more historically grounded approach; however, our interpretations diverge. In 1997, Benfey described *Le Pédicure* as an image of: "A girl sitting on a sofa . . . having her toenails clipped. . . . *The Pedicure* is an affectionate record of the luxurious practices preserved in the Musson house, even as their comfortable life-style was threatened by financial insecurity."<sup>[31]</sup> Two years later, in his contribution to the catalogue for the New Orleans Museum of Art's ground-breaking exhibition *Degas and New Orleans*, Benfey adds that *Le Pédicure* is symbolic of an old Creole family's effort "to cling to the props of the *ancien régime* way of life," despite its financial insolvency following the Civil War and the impending bankruptcy of its cotton business.<sup>[32]</sup> Benfey further contends that *Le Pédicure* depicts a "specialist" and "records the visit of the podiatrist to tend to a young niece's feet."<sup>[33]</sup> However, podiatry did not yet exist in 1873, chiropodists were not really considered "specialists," and Joe's toenails are not being clipped. Benfey's reading, thus, relies on some ahistorical assumptions and cannot be fully sustained with careful scrutiny of the image and the status of late nineteenth-century chiropody.

Benfey also posits that the image depicts a "doctor-patient theme."<sup>[34]</sup> But contemporaries would have been unlikely to mistake the male figure for a doctor, whose social standing would have far exceeded that of a chiropodist, who had no professional training and was commonly ridiculed. Even Isachar Zacharie, President Lincoln's personal chiropodist, was called by the anti-Republican press a "conniving toenail trimmer."<sup>[35]</sup> In 1914, Dr. Maurice Lewi confirmed that the field was suspect in the late nineteenth century: "Before 1895 . . . every barber, masseur and shoemaker had the same right to practice chiropody as those who for years had been engaged in its practice."<sup>[36]</sup> The worst offenders, Lewi wrote, were the "traveling chiropodists . . . [who] were little more than what are commonly known as tramps, the only difference

between them and the ordinary hobo being that the former had a kit of tools and a few bottles of medicine plus unlimited effrontery.”[37] There were no laws to regulate chiropody, which further stigmatized it and led to abuses of its practice. Lewis Durlacher, chiropodist to the British monarchy, lamented the split between the reliable chiropodist and the quack in his 1845 treatise:

I have devoted nearly thirty years' practical experience to the investigation, and . . . I have never been able to discover any certain cure for corns. Nevertheless, men are . . . to be found bold enough . . . to assert . . . that they possess an infallible nostrum, capable of thoroughly eradicating corns; and others, who pretend to extract them, seek to aid their trickery and charlatanerie by exhibiting small speculae as the roots of the corns they have extracted . . . From such men the public . . . ought to be protected either by legislative enactments, or by the licensing medical bodies making the diseases of the feet a part of the regular medical education.[38]

Despite Durlacher's plea for regulation, the first laws governing the practice of chiropody in the United States were not created until 1895, when the slow process of professionalizing the chiropodist from “tabooed corn-cutter”[39] to podiatrist began. New Jersey was the first state to pass legislation in 1908, providing a model for other states including Louisiana, which, when it approved its Chiropody Law in 1916, was criticized for being retrograde. An editorial in the *Chiropodists Journal* in 1916 summarized these complaints: “The Louisiana law is inferior to the New Jersey act from every proper view point of chiropody. . . . Instead of increasing the scope and prestige of chiropody as a profession, it reduces and narrows it.”[40] If the field of chiropody was still being denigrated in Louisiana as late as 1916, we can infer that when Degas executed *Le Pédicure*, attitudes towards chiropody in New Orleans were likely as, or even more, negative.

Even as the practice of chiropody was derided in the medical and pseudo-medical literature, the importance of ensuring the health of children's feet was advocated in the family health care manuals popular in France and the United States in the late nineteenth century. In 1873, J. L. Peck claimed that caring for children's feet could ensure for them a happier and healthier future.[41] Girls' feet seem to have been of particular concern as some thought that girls' feet were too fragile to be able to support adequately a growing body. For example, Zacharie remarked in 1860: “The growth of the foot of a delicate girl is ill able to bear the constant weight of the body, and by degrees sinks under it and loses its beauty of form.”[42] Contemporaries also acknowledged the usually better quality of boys' and men's shoes in comparison to girls' and women's footwear.[43] It is, thus, not surprising that *Le Pédicure* features a young girl undergoing a minor chiropodical procedure, which, in my interpretation, is likely the excision of an ingrown toenail. “When the nail on the great toe grows in,” wrote Louis J. Adolphus in 1865, “do not try wild remedies. . . . You ought to have the advice of a Chiropodist.”[44] And in his widely-consulted 1876 French family health manual, Dr. J.-B. Fonsagrives, too, explained that an ingrown nail is “an extremely painful condition that is caused by the penetration of the sharp border of the nail into the soft tissue. . . . It reaches such a point that an operation is necessary.”[45]

Too-tight shoes and “much-darned stockings”[46] were identified as the main causes of ingrown toenails. That they were a common problem is demonstrated by the explosion of discussions of how best to treat ingrown nails in family health guides and the medical and



chiropractical texts of the second half of the nineteenth century in France and the United States. The details are repugnant, but quotation of some of the methods will reveal conceptions of both the malady and the cure. George A. White outlined his approach in 1869: "I . . . take a small chisel-shaped instrument, and . . . carefully dissect a narrow piece—gradually directing the edge of the instrument outwards."[\[47\]](#) And Francis Gurney Smith advocated his technique of "thinning the whole length of the middle of the nail . . . by scraping it perseveringly with the sharp edge of a piece of glass . . . till the middle of the nail be as thin as writing-paper, and will readily bend under the pressure of the finger-nail."[\[48\]](#) But it is M. Lisfranc's method that is most compelling since it is analogous to what Degas represents in *Le Pédicure*. Joseph-François Malgaigne wrote that Lisfranc "pushes the point of a straight bistoury from within outwards, immediately between the nail and the flesh that covers it."[\[49\]](#) The instrument in Degas's painting, of which we see only an impastoed sheeny glint, is clearly in the process, with the help of the chiropodist's fingernail, of being wedged between the edge of Joe's toenail and the skin surrounding it.

Ernest C. Stanaback described the instruments that would have been employed at the time for "exploring ingrown nails." The "No. 9" excavator, "used to raise the sides of the nail,"[\[50\]](#) and the "No. 3" chisel (fig. 2), "used for general ingrown nail work,"[\[51\]](#) in particular are similar to the tool in Degas's image. Though it might be more appealing—if one can call it that—to see this painting as a depiction of a podiatrist clipping a child's toenails, both the historical reality and the visual evidence in the painting require a less glamorous conclusion. An excavator, bistoury, or chisel, the instrument in *Le Pédicure* calls attention not just to the unpleasant procedure being performed but also to the chiropodist's own unclean looking fingernail, which he engages to lift the corner of Joe's toenail. The dirty nail would not have surprised a contemporary viewer, for Degas's painting pre-dates the acceptance of Semmelweis's and Lister's discoveries regarding the necessity to cleanse one's hands and sterilize equipment in all medical and quasi-medical situations.[\[52\]](#) Their then-radical findings are relevant to our analysis since they underscore the need for contextualizing *Le Pédicure* historically. Dirty fingernails during a procedure that for us demands cleanliness would not have been unusual in late nineteenth-century France or America. The ragged gray outline of the chiropodist's fingernail serves a formal purpose, too, for it directs us to the thing we know is the generative force of the scene: Joe's hidden toenail. The chiropodist's fingernail may even be seen as a kind of stand-in for Joe's toenail, the presence of the former a reminder of the visual absence of the latter.

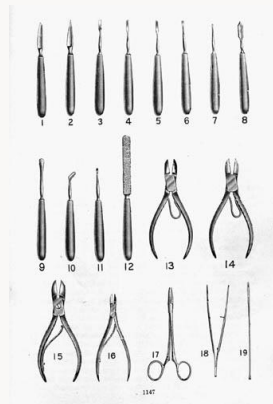


Fig. 2, “No. 9’ Excavator and ‘No. 3’ Chisel,” *Text Book of Chiropody* (NY: The School of Chiropody of NY, 1914): 1147. [\[larger image\]](#)

### The Painting

Degas compels us to acknowledge the importance of certain tensions in the painting by making opposition, particularly between presence and absence, the seen and not seen, a dominant theme in both subject and form. The white cloth that hangs over the chair on which Joe’s foot is propped stages a play between what is and is not given to our view. Screening out part of the chiropodist’s torso, right arm, and hand, the cloth itself enforces the larger dialectic between visibility and its corollary that the painting performs. Light from a barely discernible window at the right margin of the composition permeates the fabric that covers the upper section of the chair, yet the expected shadow of the chiropodist’s torso behind the cloth is missing. Instead, we observe only the suggestion of his right arm and hand, the latter more convincingly rendered as it resolves into a darker gray trace at the lower right corner of the chair back. Pools of light bloom across the material and create patterns of weak greens, pinks, and grays that do not correspond in either color or shape with what they shield or the light they refract. Seemingly errant smudges of ochre sully the white fabric where it folds along the seat and leg of the chair, bunches at Joe’s waist, and collects on the floor. Things in *Le Pédicure* are not necessarily what they appear to be.

What is explicitly hidden in the image—Joe’s body—is ironically emphasized because it is secreted in a way that overtly underlines its visual absence. The inaccessibility of the girl’s body is accentuated not only by the white fabric that covers it but also by the loosely painted lavender dress cast conspicuously over the back edge of the banquette. Indeed, the formlessness of the uninhabited dress calls increased attention to the fact that Joe is not wearing it at the same time that it uncannily mimics her flaccid pose. This visual echo between the garment and Joe’s body connects and therefore makes clear the surprising disconnection between the two. That this piece of unworn clothing had particular significance for Degas is substantiated by a basic fact: he painted it in late in the process of finishing the work. According to Henri Loyrette, “X-radiography of the painting shows that he [Degas] added a few more touches at a later stage, draping the piece of clothing over the sofa.”<sup>[53]</sup> Loyrette also tells us that during the course of working on the painting, Degas slightly altered the tilt of the chiropodist’s head, lessened the visible amount of his white collar, increased the height of the

bureau, and modified the objects on it. But Degas's most dramatic adjustment, to my mind, was to fill what would otherwise have been an empty expanse at the top left edge of the banquette with a brilliantly colored swatch of cloth. The artist considered his evolving composition and added the pale purple garment, perhaps to give a snap of vibrancy to the dramatically recessed middle ground, perhaps to break up or serve as a counterpoint to the stretch of mottled green that dominates the background. And though the dress brings a pop of formal brilliance to the painting, I contend that the garment also serves as a provocative signal of not just the young girl's inert body, but also her state of undress.

Most of Joe's body is concealed beneath a simple piece of white cloth. So prominent in the painting is the fabric over Joe's body that Paul-André Lemoisne, who compiled the first lengthy monograph of Degas's oeuvre in the mid-1940s, wrote: "And this painting, entitled *The Chiropodist*, could just as well be: *Portrait of a sheet and a dressing gown*."<sup>[54]</sup> What Lemoisne misses in his sardonic re-titling of the painting is the relationship among the "sheet," the "dressing gown,"<sup>[55]</sup> and the body that they do and do not protect. Only Joe's right hand, leg, and foot are actually exposed. That parts of her body are revealed whereas others are not highlights the former and causes a kind of conceptual disturbance, a startling *frisson*. We wonder, in fact, why Joe is not clothed. Perhaps it would have been indelicate for her to gather up the bottom of her dress while she soaked her foot before the procedure in the tub that sits at the right edge of the painting.<sup>[56]</sup> Or perhaps the hem of her dress needed to be out of the way as it could have interfered with and been soiled by the chiropodist's work. Whatever the reasons, Degas's inclusion of the unworn garment disrupts decorum. In his description of the history of chiropody in the United States, A. Owen Penney articulates the concerns of husbands and fathers regarding the immodesty necessitated by a visit with a chiropodist: "To remove their [women and girls] stockings and expose their bare feet to a stranger . . . was, to many of them, unthinkable. Indeed, some husbands and fathers would not even allow their wives and daughters to be seen in a chiropodist's office."<sup>[57]</sup> Joe has clearly taken off more than her stockings.

That a partially covered child lies in close proximity to a fully dressed older man, a chiropodist, who, in the 1870s, could have been a figure of dubious respectability, pushes the image ever-so-slightly past the bounds of propriety. Degas even further emphasizes Joe's lack of clothing by giving us the merest wink of what may be her chemise or pantaloons<sup>[58]</sup> where the cool bleached white of the cloth meets the cadaverous paleness of her shin. This salmon pink slip of paint is a visual tease that forces us to wonder what, if anything, the child is wearing beneath the cloth. Moreover, this bit of scumbled paint, its contours ill-defined and non-illusionistic, reveals the constructedness of the image. Even the white pigment that strays over this flash of fabric entices, and these deliberately misplaced marks of paint remind us of the presence of another older male figure—the artist. To be sure, this place where Degas inserts a dash of pinkish paint helps him to resolve the formal problem of how to meet the white of the cloth with the more ghostly white of the girl's skin, but it is also a spot of anxiety. For, even if what we see suggests that Joe may not be entirely naked beneath the white fabric, etiquette dictated that undergarments should not be visible.<sup>[59]</sup> In other words, seeing the rustle of what is possibly the girl's underclothing is almost as improper as imagining that she is fully unclothed beneath the fabric that hangs across her body.

And just so we do not miss this reference to Joe's undergarments, Degas paints in immediately to her right a piece of lacey material that appears to be part of a pinafore, another portion of which is suggested where Degas repeats the same frothy, peachy beige along the right edge of the purple dress. The inclusion of the frilly patch at Joe's side necessitated that Degas deepen the hue of the area on the banquette upon which it lies so that he could hone the distinction between the article of clothing and the upholstery. This more intensely saturated expanse of the banquette, in turn, virtually matches the questionable band of paint that peeks from between the cloth and Joe's leg and establishes a field of visual connections. Resembling in shape and substance a woman's corset, the lacey material to Joe's right implicitly alludes to undergarments and the body we do not see. This gossamer swath and the errant bit of pink paint seem to reference underthings, the body, and immodesty, whether Degas meant them to or not.

The artist's choices press us to think about Joe's unclothed body and to consider its vulnerability, especially in relation to the fully clothed man who works on her toe. Indeed, Degas makes Joe's state of dress unclear, and by doing this he gives the scene an unexpected and unsettling crackle. In the Balfour/Musson/Degas household in New Orleans, the rules of deportment would have been followed, and children would have been dressed appropriately, particularly in the presence of a non-family member. So it is especially curious that Degas, though in need of willing and motionless indoor subjects, chose to represent a situation that hardly reinforces the accepted conventions of polite society. Even though Degas irreverently critiqued and rejected many bourgeois social norms and matters of decorum throughout his career, the subjects of those images are not his own family members, let alone a young child whom, by all accounts, he adored.

There is something uncomfortably evocative in the way in which Degas contrasts the clothed chiropodist with the unclothed Joe. Even if inadvertently, *Le Pédicure* seems to forecast Degas's future images of dark-clad men in the company of fully or partially dressed women seated on or standing near banquettes. Like the gentlemen in his brothel monotypes from the late 1870s who enter rooms occupied by naked and semi-naked prostitutes—for example, *The Serious Client* of ca. 1879 (fig. 3) and *The Client* of 1879 (fig. 4)—the chiropodist in *Le Pédicure* is paired with what we could arguably read as his converse, a well-bred young girl whose dress has been conspicuously cast aside and whose body is protected only by a length of white cloth. And though the characters in the brothel scenes are hardly akin to those in *Le Pédicure*, the pitting of disparate types—male and female, clothed and not, old and young—generates a like form of disquietude for the viewer.



Fig. 3, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *The Serious Client*, ca. 1879. Monotype on wove paper. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *The Client*, 1879. Monotype in black ink on white paper. Musée Picasso, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Artstor and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux. [\[larger image\]](#)

The strewn clothing in *Le Pédicure* also relates to another point in Degas's oeuvre, as it recalls its counterpart in *Interior* of 1868 or 69 (fig. 5). Though about four years separate the execution of these two wildly different paintings, the similar treatment of uninhabited clothing and the juxtaposition of a fully clothed male with a partially unclothed female drives the images into a rich, if unanticipated, conversation. In *Interior*, the woman's bonnet is splayed upon the end of a bed, and her coat and what is likely her dress are thrown over the top of the bed's footboard. A corset, its filmy fabric much like the lacey object's in *Le Pédicure*, lies emptied and lifeless on the floor. The discarded clothing, along with the menacing male figure who lurks at the right edge in a wash of shadow and the crumpled female figure clad only in the chemise that slips off her shoulder, have inspired multiple interpretations of *Interior*, most of which involve sex, both consensual and not.<sup>[60]</sup> While I am not suggesting that *Le Pédicure* presents a sexual situation, I do think that the collocation of like elements, even in two such thematically incongruent images, throws into sharp relief what I claim is a startling undercurrent of impropriety in *Le Pédicure*.



Fig. 5, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Interior*, 1868 or 1869. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. Photograph courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the surface, *Le Pédicure* may thus appear to be a relatively benign image, but its constituent parts combine to render it something surprisingly else. I am reminded of the letter Degas wrote to Tissot in 1872: “Nothing is as difficult as doing family portraits. To make a cousin sit for you who is feeding an imp of two months is quite hard work. To get young children to pose on the steps is another job of work which doubles the fatigue of the first.”<sup>[61]</sup> But, is it enough to presume that Degas saw in this scenario his chance to have a live, cooperative, and motionless model and so decided he would depict young Joe in what I have tried to show is an unsuitable situation? He could easily have dressed her and omitted the allusion to her undergarment; he could surely have made her look more alert and not given her a lolling head and a limp, unfocused body, the weight of which sags dejectedly to its left. I cannot help but want to know why Degas made certain choices that took what could have been a more innocuous portrait of his cherished niece—a keepsake that he would take back with him to France—and turned it into a painting that challenges some of the most basic tenets of respectable bourgeois culture in the early 1870s in both Paris and New Orleans.

Is it pain that shadows Joe’s almost-closed eyes, furrows her brow, and leaves her enervated and wilted? It is certainly possible that some form of sedation may be the cause of her sleepy state. In late nineteenth-century France—and one can surmise that this practice would have been followed in the United States as well—it was not uncommon to sedate the patient while removing an ingrown toenail. According to Dr. Paulin Eugène Gillette, writing in 1878 regarding the technique of “le Docteur Duplay” of the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris:

He employs local anesthesia with crushed ice and sea salt or with an apparatus called the pulverizer of Richardson. . . . In order to avoid, after the [patient] wakes up, the pain returning, M. Duplay applies to the wound’s surface a solution of chlorhydrate of morphine 1/100th with the wadded dressing.<sup>[62]</sup>

Though Gillette explains that Duplay applied a local anesthetic, the words “in order to avoid, after the [patient] wakes up, the pain returning” imply that the patient would have been unconscious for the procedure. “Le Professeur Verneuil” of the Hôpital de la Pitié, according to Gillette, utilized the “practice of local anesthesia with ether”<sup>[63]</sup> when treating an ingrown nail. We learn from Dr. Hermann Meyer’s 1861 classic text *Why the Shoe Pinches* that chloroform

would have been administered in Zurich. “How much suffering,” writes Meyer, “is endured from nails *growing in* is too well known; and but a few months have passed since a professional brother . . . *actually lost his life while under chloroform for an operation rendered necessary by this cause.*”[\[64\]](#) As these sources indicate, it would have been standard practice in Paris and Zurich to employ ether or chloroform, both of which would sedate the patient, for the removal of an ingrown toenail in a hospital setting. However, most surgeries in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century would have been performed in the home and, though the statistics are spotty, some form of sedation would probably have been utilized in those situations as well.[\[65\]](#)

Ether, chloroform, or another sedative may, thus, be responsible for Joe’s inertia. Still, Degas’s decision to represent an artificially listless child is itself disturbing. Slumped against the banquette, helpless as an artist’s dummy, Joe is the very antithesis of what a healthy child should be. According to Pye Henry Chavasse, writing in 1873 in his manual for mothers on the care of children: “It is sad enough to see dismal and doleful men and women, but it is a truly lamentable and unnatural sight to see a doleful child! The young ought to be as playful and as full of innocent mischief as a kitten.”[\[66\]](#) Even if Joe’s lack of animation is sedative related, it is, to use Chavasse’s words, “truly lamentable and unnatural” for her to be painted, captured for eternity, in such a condition by her loving uncle.

That Joe seems lifeless is certainly odd enough, but the particular qualities of that lifelessness, the pitiful sag of her young body and the eyes that seem to struggle to open, sharpen further our sense that something is not quite right. Indeed, Degas makes the line between sedation and melancholy wafer thin, perhaps as a way, consciously or not, to turn the child into a projection of his own sorrow, of his personal sense of both already-experienced and impending loss and mourning *vis-à-vis* his mother and his New Orleans family respectively. In other words, I am arguing that this painting is uniquely porous and allows for a reading that, though rooted in the image and history, could also benefit from the consideration of more speculative biographical and psychoanalytic elements. Whatever the incentive, Degas’s decision to portray Joe in what may be an anesthetic-induced state of immobility expands analytic possibility, for it leaves her more defenseless and available to both concrete and more tentative interpretation. Indeed, Joe’s torpidity highlights what we know is there, but that we cannot quite pin down—the aspects of the image that together make it melancholic and troubling, maybe even deathly.

I am not the first to see a whiff of something that conjures death in the painting. I find it in Joe’s cloaked eyes and enfeebled body; Henri Loyrette sees the cloth that lies across Joe as a shroud. For him, the “shroud” turns Joe into “a saint in a medieval or Renaissance work, whose death is being mourned by a faithful disciple.”[\[67\]](#) In my reading, however, the lay of the cloth, while peculiar, does not suggest Degas’s desire to turn Joe into a saint. Nor does the painting, as Loyrette further contends, refer to the compositions of the ancient masters.[\[68\]](#) The dramatic perspective, compressed space, and painterly, at times nearly abstracted, brushwork alone contradict such an assertion. The way Degas fashions the fabric horizontally over Joe’s chest and lengthwise down her torso and left arm causes her to seem helpless and trapped. The marked droop and lengthening of her left arm turns it into a feeble appendage that can scarcely bear the weight of the body that leans on it. Even her exposed right hand is so schematically represented that it, too, looks as if it is unusable. That it lies in such close

proximity to the chiropodist's more detailed working hand further stresses the ineffectiveness of Joe's right hand. Though it is free of the cloth that tamps down and envelops her left appendage, her right hand, with its blurred finger articulations and mitt-like shape, is likewise mystifying.

Stranger still, is the bloodless white of the skin of Joe's exposed shin, which appears all the more anemic in contrast with the rosiness of the underside of her heel and toes. Degas vigorously rakes a chalky pigment over much of the expanse of Joe's leg, simultaneously representing the play of light across it and the artist's touch, literally to the surface of the painting and metaphorically to the child's skin. This doubling of touch re-directs us, however unsettlingly, back to the touch of the chiropodist, with his unclean fingernail and pointed instrument. Degas saturates the black of the chiropodist's suit, the intense pitch of which only enhances the sense that the color of Joe's leg is wrong, unhealthy, even cadaverous. That the artist wanted to paint a variety of more veristic flesh tones elsewhere in the image is apparent in the pate and face of the chiropodist. A luminous amalgamation of buffered green with pinks and dusky browns, his bald head reflects the light from the window, whereas his face, ruddy and naturalistically shadowed, is constituted by the mingling of darker browns with peachy hues. Strokes of pinker pigment just under his eye and along the line of his nose even further expand the sense of liveliness that Degas gives to the male figure's skin.

Joe's face, on the other hand, is muffled in deep shadow. While not the ashen white of her bare leg, it is less healthy looking in comparison to the chiropodist's more aged face. Light catches the bridge of her nose and peak of her forehead, the striking effect of which further dulls the gray brown of the rest. Her barely open eyes seem to glance distractedly toward the man who looks intently down at her foot, a broken circuit of gazes that leads us back to the point of the painting; to the silvered flash and fine geometry of the chiropodist's instrument. This quick shiver of lustery metal that parses nail from flesh consolidates meaning for the image. Simple as light, it reminds us how interpretation can go wrong when titles are mistranslated and historical context goes unexplored. Indeed, this detail, this distilled candescence that takes up so little space in the painting, in the end, directs us right to where we need to be, to the artist who determined the very plot of *Le Pédicure*.

That Degas asserts his presence everywhere, that we can almost feel the movement of his brush as he laid pigment onto the pale-blue paper he had glued to canvas, is not unusual for him. The haptic is, indeed, a hallmark of his visual practice. But the sense and materiality of touch are distinctively mobilized in *Le Pédicure*. For here the family touch meets the family gaze. Degas's touch tacitly evokes, to use Anthea Callen's apposite words, "memories of touch,"<sup>[69]</sup> of the mother who died when he was so young. Prefiguring Joe's imminent absence from Degas's life—which, on some level, may have refigured the death of his mother—this painting is haunted by what has been and is about-to-be lost for him: his family, New Orleans, a certain connection to his long-deceased mother. This brings me back once more to Sontag's arresting words: "All photographs are *memento mori*. . . . All photographs testify to time's relentless melt."<sup>[70]</sup> *Le Pédicure* is a kind of painted *memento mori* that functions, not unlike Sontag's photograph, as a testament to the transience of time, to the inexorable current of absence and loss. This painting takes the place, albeit in a fragile way, of what and who Degas knew he would never see again even as it implicitly references the mother who died. Indeed, *Le Pédicure*'s very presence signifies the richness and depth of the mournfulness it contains.



“What I see has been here . . . and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred,”<sup>[71]</sup> Roland Barthes wrote in relation to the work of the photograph more than one hundred years after Degas painted his picture of Joe. And yet, Barthes’s moving observation, like Sontag’s, is remarkably apt for *Le Pédicure*, which I believe functioned in a particular and profound way for its author. A remnant of a momentous journey, this painting remained in the artist’s personal collection until he sold it to the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in 1892. And even then, Degas kept a photograph of *Le Pédicure* (Musée d’Orsay, Paris).<sup>[72]</sup> At his death, the photograph, along with the other paintings he made of female relatives in New Orleans, was still in his possession.<sup>[73]</sup> One can only speculate why, of all his paintings of women family members in New Orleans, Degas ultimately sold only *Le Pédicure*, but kept a black and white reproduction of it. A silver print could allow him to preserve some part of the painting, maintain proof of its existence, and perhaps function as a less painful echo of its even more melancholy source. Our post-knowledge that Joe would die of scarlet fever less than eight years after Degas’s visit<sup>[74]</sup> only further concentrates our appreciation now of how the specter of loss and mourning lies like a thick and ghostly glaze across this painting. As with his other family pictures from New Orleans, Edgar Degas painted *Le Pédicure* so he would not forget.

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## Notes

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All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

[1] We know from Paul-André Lemoisne that the identity of the girl in the painting is Joe. See Paul-André Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954), 71. Estelle Josephine Balfour, who went by the name Joe, was the daughter of Degas's cousin Estelle Musson Balfour Degas and her first husband, Joseph Davis Balfour. Estelle married Degas's brother René in 1869. See Jean Sutherland Boggs, "Josephine (Joe) Balfour: (1863–81)" in *Degas and New Orleans: A French Impressionist in America*, ed. Gail Feigenbaum, exh. cat. (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1999), 220–21. For consistency, and since Degas was more of an avuncular figure than a cousin to Joe, I will refer to her as Degas's niece and to Degas as Joe's uncle.

[2] Although we do not know definitively whether Degas himself titled the painting, it has been called *Le Pédicure* at least since 1899, when Henry O. Havemeyer referred to it as such in a letter to the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, and so any subsequent analysis of the painting has been done with the knowledge of this title. See letter dated January 24, 1899, quoted in Frances Weitzenhoffer, *The Havemeyers: Impressionism Comes to America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 134.

[3] For a contemporary translation of *pédicure*, see Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française contenant pour la nomenclature; pour la grammaire; pour la signification des mots; pour la partie historique; pour l'étymologie* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et cie, 1873), s.v. "pédicure": "PÉDICURE: Nom de ceux qui se livrent spécialement à l'extirpation des cors et durillons." "CHIROPODIST: Name of those who involve themselves especially in the removal of corns and calluses."

[4] Marcia Pointon *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 177.

[5] The location in which *Le Pédicure* was completed has been debated. Using a narrowly defined understanding of Degas's notion of portraiture as he describes it in his letters from New Orleans, Henri Loyrette speculates that the painting was finished after Degas returned to France. Loyrette writes: "In his correspondence, Degas mentions painting only family portraits and the two versions of the 'Cotton Market' while in New Orleans; it is very probable that *The Pédicure*, like *The Song Rehearsal*, which is also more a genre scene than a portrait . . . were finished in the calm of his Paris studio." Henri Loyrette, "I: 1853–1873," in Jean Sutherland Boggs and others, *Degas*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1988), 192. Boggs also points out that: "It may have been with the fragility of the paint surface in mind that Degas decided to leave two of his most charming New Orleans paintings, *Le Pédicure* and *The Song Rehearsal*, to be finished at home." Jean Sutherland Boggs, "The Rehearsal of a Song, 1873," in Feigenbaum, *Degas and New Orleans*, 236. Boggs's logic does not work since Degas would have had the same concern for all of the paintings he made in New Orleans.

[6] Roy McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times, and Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 110.

[7] In fact, Degas represented Estelle more than any other family member. During her 1865 visit to France, he depicted her three times: *Estelle Musson Balfour* (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore); *Mme Michel Musson and her Daughters Estelle and Désirée* (Art Institute of Chicago); *Young Woman in an Armchair (Drawing of Estelle Musson Balfour)* (private collection, The Bahamas). In New Orleans, Degas painted Estelle three times: *Woman with Vase of Flowers* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), *Madame René De Gas* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), *Portrait of Mme René De Gas, née Estelle Musson* (New Orleans Museum of Art). I have elsewhere argued that Estelle may be the model for *Woman with a Bandaged Eye* (Detroit Institute of Art). For this interpretation of *Woman with a Bandaged Eye* and analyses of the paintings we know are of Estelle as well as discussion of Degas's relationship with her, see Marni Reva Kessler, "Ocular Anxiety and the Pink Tea Cup: Edgar Degas's *Woman with Bandage*," *Nineteenth-Century Art World Wide* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), accessed July 9, 2014, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn06/ocular-anxiety-and-the-pink-tea-cup-edgar-degass-woman-with-bandage>, unpaginated. Boggs proposes that Estelle may have modeled for one of the figures in *The Song Rehearsal*. Boggs, "Rehearsal of a Song, 1873," 239.

[8] We know about the Degas brothers' estrangement from a letter written by Michel Musson to Henri Musson (both Degas's uncles) on September 29, 1879. See Marilyn R. Brown, *The DeGas-Musson Family Papers: An Annotated Inventory* (New Orleans: Tulane University, The Howard Tilton Memorial Library, 1991), 33. According to McMullen, Edgar and René reconciled in 1893. McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times, and Work*, 413.

[9] No known medical records survive to document Estelle's specific diagnosis. However, based upon information from René and Estelle's son Gaston, John Rewald in 1946 called her condition ophthalmia. See John Rewald, "Degas and his Family in New Orleans," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6, no. 30 (August 1946): 111.

[10] Marcel Guerin, ed., *Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: Letters*, trans. Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1947), 19.

[11] "Mes yeux vont bien mieux. Je travaille, il est vrai, peu, quoiqu'à des choses difficiles. Des portraits de famille, il faut les faire assez au goût de la famille, dans les lumières impossibles,

très dérangé, avec des modèles pleins d'affection mais un peu sans gêne et vous prenant bien moins au sérieux parce que vous êtes leur neveu ou leur cousin." Edgar Degas, *Lettres de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (Caen: Échoppe, 1988), unpaginated.

[12] Guerin, *Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: Letters*, 25.

[13] Linda Nochlin's persuasive argument that Degas's depiction of his Italian relatives in *The Bellelli Family* be contextualized within both a historical moment and a specific family's history and all the tensions and anxieties that family's story contains, has inspired my interpretation of *Le Pédicure*. Linda Nochlin, "A House is Not a Home: Degas and the Subversion of the Family," in *Representing Women* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 154.

[14] I borrow the phrase "portrait encounter" from Tamar Garb, who uses it to convey the richness of the relationship between artist and sitter for a portrait. Tamar Garb, *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France 1814–1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 56, 136.

[15] Henri Loyrette claims that *Le Pédicure* and *The Song Rehearsal* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC) "are not portraits but are genre scenes" (ne sont plus des portraits mais des scènes de genre). Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1991), 300. Jean Sutherland Boggs writes: "*Le Pédicure*, more properly belongs to genre than to portraiture." Boggs, "Josephine (Joe) Balfour: (1863–81)," 221. However, Gail Feigenbaum acknowledges that "virtually all the works from the trip are, on some level, family portraits." Gail Feigenbaum, "Edgar Degas, Almost a Son of Louisiana," in Feigenbaum, *Degas and New Orleans*, 15.

[16] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 65.

[17] McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times, and Work*, 20.

[18] I use the term "family photograph" here to refer both to a photograph one specifically takes of one's own family member(s) as well as to pictures of one's family member(s) in general.

[19] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.

[20] Marianne Hirsch, "Introduction: Familial Looking," in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover, NH and London: Dartmouth University Press, 1999), xvii.

[21] *Ibid.*, xvi.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] When Estelle gave birth to Degas's goddaughter Jeanne in December of 1872, the number of children in this branch of Degas's family grew to a total of seven. See McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times, and Work*, 233–34.

[24] Degas, in fact, began his visual exploration of Joe when she was a small child. Estelle writes on February 3, 1864 from France to her father in New Orleans that Degas made sketches of Joe during at least one of his visits to Bourg-en-Bresse. The DeGas-Musson Papers, box 1, folder 53, Manuscripts Collection 226, Manuscripts Department, Tulane University, New Orleans.

[25] "Souvent il lui . . . d'entendre sa mère, pour laquelle il avait une véritable adoration, parler de son pays, la Nouvelle-Orléans, avec une certaine nostalgie. Peu à peu le désir était né en Degas d'aller voir un jour ce pays qui était un peu le sien, par sa mère." Jeanne Fèvre, *Mon Oncle Degas: Souvenirs et documents inédits recueillis et publiés par Pierre Borel* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1949), 29. For more on the connection among the artist, his mother, and New Orleans, see also Feigenbaum, "Edgar Degas, Almost a Son of Louisiana," 3–21.

[26] My use of the term melancholy nods to Freud's theory of melancholia, as he articulated it in "Mourning and Melancholia," as the state in which loss is not accepted or healthily processed and leads to an unconscious pathological response, whereas mourning is a non-pathological reaction to loss that is consolable and resolvable. Freud's rigid understanding of loss does not allow for the possibility of what I would call the discursive reality of how we may experience loss. Therefore, I use melancholy in a more general sense to capture the ways normal grief can, without being pathological, be protracted and expressed over time. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1917), 14:243–58. Several recent publications have influenced my conceptualization of melancholy. Michael Ann Holly sees melancholy as a generative force in her exploration of the work of art history. She asks: "How might melancholy . . . as both a metaphor and as explanatory concept . . . acknowledge the elegiac nature of our disciplinary transactions with the past?" Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 6. Ilit Ferber, too, sees the potential for understanding melancholy in a more nuanced way as she reads it through and in the early work of Walter

Benjamin. Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 12, 16–66.

[27] I employ the word mourning as I do melancholy, in the Freudian sense, but also to capture the experience of grief as complex and layered. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243–58.

[28] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1973), 12.

[29] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76–77.

[30] In Degas's only other New Orleans image that includes children, *Children on a Doorstep* (New Orleans) of 1872 (Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen), he represents three playing young children, as an older girl (commonly interpreted as Joe) leans on an open door, whirls of brown paint from her waist to her feet undoing the possibility of reading her as standing still.

[31] Christopher Benfey, *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 148.

[32] Marilyn R. Brown discovered that Musson, Prestidge, & Co. declared bankruptcy on February 1, 1873. See Marilyn R. Brown, *Degas and the Business of Art: A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 32–34.

[33] Christopher Benfey, "Exorcizing the Exotic," in Feigenbaum, *Degas and New Orleans*, 27.

[34] Benfey, *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters*, 150.

[35] "Isachar Zacharie," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed July 8, 2014, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/zacharie.html>.

[36] Maurice Lewi, ed., *Text Book of Chiropody* (New York: The School of Chiropody of NY, 1914), 71.

[37] *Ibid.*, 71–72.

[38] Lewis Durlacher, *A Treatise on Corns, Bunions, the Diseases of Nails, and the General Management of the Feet* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), x-xi.

[39] Alfred Joseph, E. K. Burnett, and Reuben H. Gross, *Practical Podiatry*, ed. Maurice J. Lewi (NY: First Institute of Podiatry, 1918), x.

[40] N. A. "Editorial Comment," *Chiropodists Journal* 2, no. 11 (November, 1916): 16.

[41] J. L. Peck, *Dress and Care of the Feet* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, Publisher, 1873), 13.

[42] Isachar Zacharie, *Surgical and Practical Observations of the Diseases of the Human Foot* (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1860), 61.

[43] On this point, see Peck, *Dress and Care of the Feet*, 48.

[44] Louis J. Adolphus, *A Concise Treatise on the Disorders of the Human Foot, Corns, Bunions, and Diseased Nails* (London: Mr. Mitchell, 1865), 71.

[45] "Une affection extrêmement douloureuse constituée par la pénétration du borde tranchant de l'ongle dans les tissus . . . en viennent souvent à un tel point qu'une opération est indiquée." J.-B. Fonsagrives, *Dictionnaire de la santé ou répertoire d'hygiène pratique à l'usage des familles et des écoles* (Paris: Librairie Charles Delagrave, 1876), 578.

[46] Charles Fowler and W. H. de Puy, *Home and Health and Home Economics: A Cyclopedic of Facts and Hints for all Departments of Life, Health, and Domestic Economy* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1879), 159.

[47] George A. White, *A Practical Monograph on the Treatment of Local Complaints of the Feet* (Washington, DC: J.L. Pearson, 1869), 19–20.

[48] Francis Gurney Smith, *Domestic Medicine, Surgery, Materia Medica; with Directions for the Diet and Management of the Sick-Room* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1851), 293.

[49] Joseph-François Malgaigne, *Manual of Operative Surgery, Based on Normal and Pathological Anatomy*, trans. Frederick Brittan (London: Henry Renshaw, 1846), 66.

[50] Ernest C. Stanaback, "Instruments: Second Section: The Chiropodist's Instruments," in Lewi, *Practical Podiatry*, 1148.

[51] *Ibid.*, 1146.

[52] Ignaz Semmelweis, *The Etiology, Concept, and Prophylaxis of Childbed Fever*, trans. and ed. K. Codell Carter (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 88–89. On Joseph Lister's theories, see Fielding H. Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine with Medical Chronology, Suggestions for Study and Bibliographic Data*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia and London: W. B. Saunders, 1929), 588–91.

[53] Loyrette, "I: 1853–1873," 192.

- [54] “Et cette toile intitulée *Le Pédicure*, pourrait tout aussi bien l’être: *Portrait d’un drap et d’un peignoir*.” Paul-André Lemoisne, *L’art de notre temps: Degas* (Paris: Librairie Centrale des Beaux-Arts, 1912), 51.
- [55] I think that by “dressing gown,” Lemoisne means the purple garment that I see as Joe’s dress.
- [56] To my knowledge, this is Degas’s first inclusion of such a tub in a painting. Shallow tubs will, of course, populate his bather/prostitute images from the 1880s and on.
- [57] A. Owen Penney, “The Epic of Chiropody in America,” in *Chiropody’s Centennial Souvenir and Who’s Who Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Profession* (Boston: Massachusetts Chiropody Association, 1940), 6.
- [58] A ten-year-old girl in New Orleans in 1873 would have worn a chemise that fell to about mid-calf and pantaloons to the knee under her dress. A woman would have worn a chemise under her dress and corset. See Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 148.
- [59] Women’s and girls’ undergarments were to remain hidden and were seen as, to use Philippe Perrot’s words: “a precious indicator of morals and sensibilities.” *Ibid.*, 143.
- [60] See especially Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.
- [61] Guerin, *Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: Letters*, 11.
- [62] “Il emploie l’anesthésie locale avec la glace pilée et le sel marin ou avec l’appareil dit pulvérisateur de Richardson. . . . Pour éviter, après le réveil, la douleur de retour, M. Duplay appliqué sur la surface cruentée une solution de chlorhydrate de morphine au 1/100e, avec le pansement ouaté.” Paulin Eugène Gillette, *Chirurgie Journalière des Hôpitaux de Paris: Répertoire de Thérapeutique Chirurgicale* (Paris: Librairie J.-B. Baillière et Fils, 1878), 316.
- [63] “pratique l’anesthésie locale soit avec l’éther.” Gillette, *Chirurgie Journalière*, 198.
- [64] Dr. Hermann Meyer, *Why the Shoe Pinches; Contributions to Applied Anatomy*, trans. John Stirling Craig (Cambridge, MA: Macmillan and Co., 1861), 4.
- [65] For more on home surgery and the use of anesthetics and sedatives in nineteenth-century America, see Henry B. Palmer *Surgical Asepsis: Especially Adapted to Operations in the Home of the Patient* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1903); Julie M. Fenster *Ether Day: The Strange Tale of America’s Greatest Medical Discovery and the Haunted Men Who Made It* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001); and Martin S. Pernick *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Anesthesia in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- [66] Pye Henry Chavasse *Advice to a Mother on the Management of her Children and on the Treatment on the Moment of Some of Their More Pressing Illnesses and Accidents* (London: J. and A. Churchill, 1873), 117.
- [67] Loyrette, “I: 1853–1873,” 192.
- [68] Loyrette, *Degas*, 302.
- [69] Callen uses this phrase in relation to Degas’s bather pastels from the 1880s. Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 138.
- [70] Sontag, *On Photography*, 12.
- [71] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.
- [72] The authorship of this photograph is unknown; however it is possible that Degas, who would immerse himself in making photographs by 1895, may have taken it. See: Musée d’Orsay, “Anonyme, ‘Le pédicure,’ tableau d’Edgar Degas,” accessed July 9, 2014, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no\\_cache=1&numid=055933&cHash=788faae8e3](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no_cache=1&numid=055933&cHash=788faae8e3).
- [73] According to the Musée d’Orsay, at Degas’s death in 1917, the photographic reproduction of *Le Pédicure* was inherited by the Fèvre family, members of which kept it until 1992.
- [74] Boggs, “Josephine (Joe) Balfour,” 220.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Le Pédicure*, 1873. Essence on paper mounted on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)

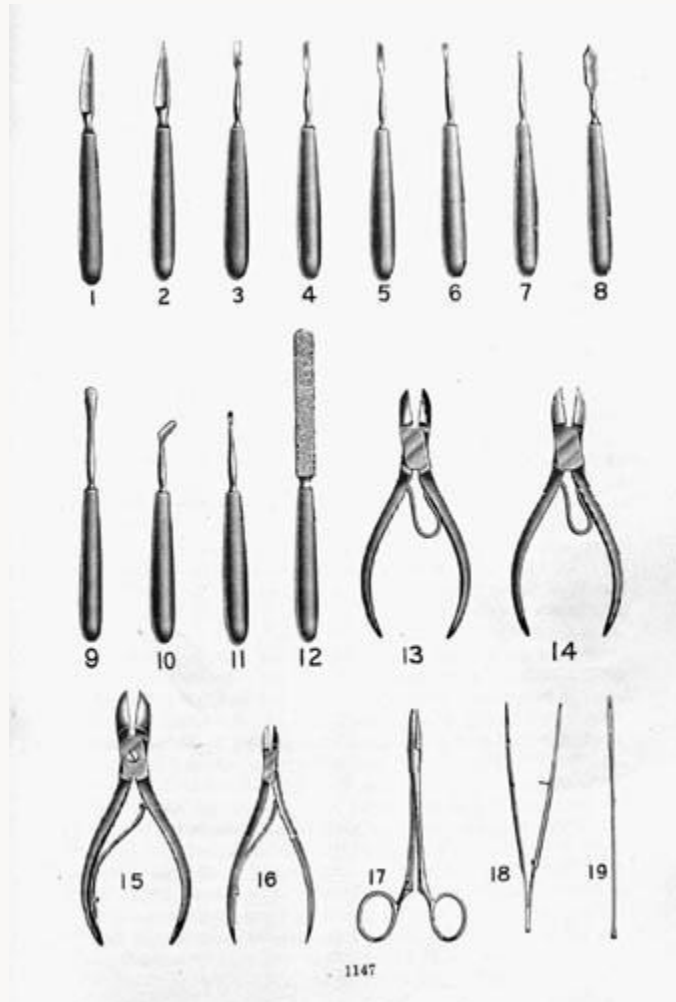


Fig. 2, “No. 9’ Excavator and ‘No. 3’ Chisel,” *Text Book of Chiropody* (NY: The School of Chiropody of NY, 1914): 1147. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *The Serious Client*, ca. 1879. Monotype on wove paper. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 4, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *The Client*, 1879. Monotype in black ink on white paper. Musée Picasso, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Artstor and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *Interior*, 1868 or 1869. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. Photograph courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. [\[return to text\]](#)