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exhibition review of

*Degas: A New Vision* and *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*

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*Degas: A New Vision*

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

October 16, 2016 – January 16, 2017

Previously at:

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

June 24 – September 18, 2016

*Seurat's Circus Sideshow*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

February 17 – May 29, 2017

Catalogues:

*Degas: A New Vision.*

Henri Loyrette.

Melbourne, Victoria: Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2016.

287 pp.; color illus.; bibliography; checklist.

\$35

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*Seurat's Circus Sideshow.*

Richard Thomson, with contributions by Susan Alyson Stein, Charlotte Hale, and Silvia A. Centeno.

New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017.

144 pp.; 117 color illus.; bibliography; checklist; index.

\$30

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Edgar Degas and Georges Seurat exhibited together only once, at the eighth and final Impressionist show in the spring of 1886. At that moment, Seurat was moving to the forefront of Paris's modern art world, and *A Sunday on the Grande Jatte—1884* (1884–86) would soon become a landmark in modern French painting. By contrast, Degas's visibility was about to subside considerably, the eighth Impressionist show being one of the last major exhibitions in which he would ever participate. Thus, the spring of 1886 marked an important moment in both artists' careers and their relationships to the viewing public, with the two of them crossing paths, but moving in somewhat opposite directions. This past year was another moment in which important parts of Seurat's and Degas's bodies of work were on view at (nearly) the same time, if not the same place, thanks to two exhibitions: *Degas: A New Vision*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and *Seurat's Circus Sideshow* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The two shows gave us the opportunity not only to revisit key aspects of each artist's oeuvre, but also to think about these two towering figures in relation to one another.

This year represents the centenary of Degas's death, an occasion marked by a number of major exhibitions of his work around the world. *Degas: A New Vision*, organized by Henri

Loyrette and Gary Tinterow, was certainly the most comprehensive of these centennial shows, drawing together an extraordinary range of works from every period of Degas's career, almost every genre he worked in, and nearly every medium that the highly experimental artist explored at some point or other. *Seurat's Circus Sideshow*, curated by Richard Thomson and Susan Alyson Stein, took the opposite approach by spotlighting a single painting, Seurat's *Parade de cirque*, which depicts circus performers and spectators at an itinerant fair in Paris (fig. 1). *Parade* was far from the only picture by Seurat in The Met's show, but the other works on view, from related studies by the artist to an abundance of different kinds of images of circuses and fair entertainments, were almost all included to enhance our understanding of Seurat's painting and its subject matter. Comparing these two exhibitions—their different structures as well as the works in them—helps bring into clearer focus how each artist went about constructing an oeuvre, the relationship between each artist's production and exhibition practices, and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century exhibition histories of each artist's body of work.



Fig. 1, Georges Seurat, *Parade de cirque* (*Circus Sideshow*), 1887–88. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Let's begin with *Degas: A New Vision*, which brought together works from museums and private collections around the world and created a truly comprehensive view of the artist's production over the span of his more than fifty year-long career. Not since the landmark 1988–89 exhibition organized by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art has the public been given the opportunity to assess the full technical and thematic diversity of Degas's work. The exhibition was organized more or less chronologically and opened with works related to some of the artist's key early history paintings, such as *Scene of War in the Middle Ages*, two oil sketches for *Young Spartans Exercising*, and numerous related preparatory drawings (fig. 2). Both the scale and mode of production of these early history paintings are relatively anomalous in the context of Degas's larger oeuvre. It is only quite late in his career, in the 1890s, that he returned to producing works on this kind of scale, as evidenced by a few of the paintings and pastels of nudes on view towards the end of the exhibition, bookending the much more modestly scaled efforts that make up almost the entirety of his body of work. Indeed, for much of his career, Degas was generally averse to producing attention grabbing statements (like Seurat's *Parade*) that could serve as centerpieces of an exhibition, nor did he tend to work in a linear manner that yielded specific preparatory works for particular pictures.



Fig. 2, View of the first gallery of *Degas: A New Vision* showing *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* and preparatory works for *Young Spartans Exercising* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

*A New Vision* included examples of almost every type of subject that interested Degas over the course of his long career. His engagement with landscape, for example, was on view both early in the exhibition, in the form of pastels dating to the late 1860s, and in his later monotypes from the 1890s. Degas's two marvelous paintings of his uncle's cotton office in New Orleans, which were produced during the artist's five-month stay in the city in 1872–73 and which now reside thousands of miles apart in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Pau, France, were a wonder to behold individually and especially as a pair (fig. 3). Equestrian imagery was seen in multiple galleries, including the section of the show devoted to the theme of the fallen jockey that occupied Degas from the 1860s through the 1890s. Here we found two major oil paintings on the subject, *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey*, first produced in the mid-1860s and subsequently reworked around 1880–81 and again in the late 1890s, and *Fallen Jockey* from 1896–98, as well as several related drawings (fig. 4). The show also included numerous compelling portraits by the artist and examples from his larger bodies of work on the subject of milliners, brothel prostitutes, café-concert performers, and laundresses. But, fittingly, it was dancers and bathers that were the best represented subjects in the exhibition, reflecting the artist's particular devotion to these two themes from the 1870s onwards (figs. 5, 6).



Fig. 3, View of the third gallery showing Degas's works produced in New Orleans.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 4, View of the fifth gallery showing Degas's works on the theme of the fallen jockey. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 5, View of the fifth gallery showing Degas's works on the ballet.  
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 6, View of the eighth gallery showing Degas's works on the theme of bathers.  
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

One of the opportunities of assembling such a comprehensive exhibition is to showcase the tremendous variety of media that Degas worked in, including oil paint, pastel, charcoal, distemper, photography, sculpture, and different types of prints, with the artist sometimes combining more than one medium in a single work. While Degas's processes and materials weren't the focus of the exhibition, the show nevertheless offered the visitor the chance to appreciate the range of Degas's technical experimentation, since nearly all of the media that he worked in were represented (one exception being Degas's extensive production of wax sculptures. Though several sculptures of horses, dancers, and bathers were included in the show, they were all bronzes that were cast after the artist's death). Degas's long-standing interest in exploring different media was featured towards the very end of the exhibition in a gallery largely devoted to the photographs that he produced during a relatively brief but intense phase of exploration of this medium around 1895 (fig. 7). Consisting of portraits of close friends and colleagues in domestic environments, as well as some self-portraits, this gallery attested to Degas's continued interest in new methods of image-making even relatively late in his career. His photographs are also remarkable for the way they foreground some of his closest social relationships, firmly situating this very private artist within a network of intimate social relations.



Fig. 7, View of the ninth gallery showing Degas's photographs. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Like Degas, Seurat is primarily known for his figure-based works (though landscape imagery plays a more important role in both artists' oeuvres than is often acknowledged). Other

similarities between the two artists can certainly be found, but it is primarily to their differences, and what they reveal about each artist's work and priorities, that I want to attend. Rather than an expansive retrospective, *Seurat's Circus Sideshow* is tightly focused, featuring a single picture around which all of the other works and objects in the show orbit. In this respect, The Met's wonderful show is part of a long tradition of exhibitions organized around one of Seurat's large-scale, figure-based paintings. This exhibition format reminds us of just how important these ambitious, labor-intensive figural works were in the artist's short career, from the very first painting he exhibited, *A Bathing Place, Asnières* of 1884 to his *Circus* of 1891. This kind of show also mirrors an important aspect of Seurat's exhibition practice, since he featured one or two large-scale figural works in almost every major show in which he participated, expressions, in part, of a particular kind of ambition and desire for visibility. Given Degas's aversion to producing this kind of work, it should come as no surprise that he reportedly mocked the *Grande Jatte* precisely on the grounds of its large scale. More broadly, one could argue that Seurat produced many of his works in order to exhibit them, while the relationship between making and exhibiting was far less direct for Degas.

By the time Seurat completed *Parade* in 1888, he invested much less time and effort in preparatory paintings and drawings than he had when working on earlier figural paintings. Nevertheless, the exhibition gathered Seurat's known conté crayon drawings on the theme of the circus sideshow, giving the viewer an interesting sense of the development of the painting's composition. The exhibition also offered visitors the valuable opportunity to see the smaller of Seurat's two versions of *Models*, which is held in a private collection, while the larger and more well known version belongs to the Barnes Foundation and cannot travel (fig. 8). The inclusion of this wonderful and rarely seen picture reminds one of the important but often overlooked fact that Seurat exhibited *Parade* alongside the Barnes *Models* at the 1888 Salon des Indépendants, and a careful study of the two pictures reveals some remarkable compositional similarities, despite their very different subjects. Nearby in the exhibition, one can also find several of Seurat's beautiful conté crayon drawings of café-concerts, four of which were also exhibited in the 1888 Indépendants exhibition and which, like *Parade*, depict not just the performers but also their spectators (fig. 9). Thus, the visitor to The Met's show was treated to a partial recreation of the group of works that Seurat assembled for the 1888 exhibition to clearly announce his interest in different kinds of performances and the experiences of their audiences.





Fig. 8, View of Seurat's *Models* and drawings of circus sideshows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, View of Seurat's drawings of café-concerts. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The primary, and monumental, achievement of The Met's exhibition was to situate *Parade* in the context of a rich array of material related to sideshows, circuses, and popular fairs. The French term *parade* is often translated as 'sideshow,' and this is as close as one can get in English, but there is no precise equivalent. The *parade* in Seurat's painting consists of members of a traveling circus troupe in Paris's largest annual itinerant fair performing outside the tent entrance in order to advertise the wonders on view inside and entice passersby into purchasing tickets, which we see a woman doing at the far right of Seurat's picture. The Met exhibition constituted a fascinating investigation into the wealth of different kinds of representations of sideshows, as well as circuses and fairs, from the ephemera of advertisements to illustrations in popular journals to paintings, drawings, and prints by a range of mid- and later- nineteenth-century artists, including some of Seurat's colleagues (fig. 10). Especially compelling works and objects on view include numerous examples of Daumier's drawings, paintings, and lithographs of sideshows as well as a wonderful display of wind instruments that gave us a sense of the cacophonous quality of these outdoor fairs (fig. 11).



Fig. 10, Circus advertisements.  
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 11, Honoré Daumier, *La Parade (The Sideshow)*, ca. 1865–66.  
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The most striking work in the exhibition besides *Parade* was likely Fernand Pelez's majestic painting, *Grimaces and Misery – The Saltimbanques*, which measures twenty feet long and which was produced at exactly the same time as Seurat's picture (fig. 12). The opportunity to view these two paintings in close proximity to one another couldn't be more illuminating. A comparison between them, as well as between Seurat's picture and the many others in the exhibition on the same theme, helps us see all the more distinctly just how different Seurat's painting is, in certain specific but crucial respects, from these other representations of sideshow and circus performances. Indeed, the exhibition as a whole made one appreciate even more acutely the almost magical inscrutability of *Parade*, that is, the peculiar dream-like atmosphere that Seurat created in his painting and the puzzling illegibility of many parts of the composition. In this way, the curators achieved a difficult feat—helping to explain Seurat's picture while also revealing its remarkable strangeness and uniqueness. The Met's exhibition thus proved that, almost 130 years after Seurat exhibited it, *Parade* still has the power to lure and entrance an audience.



Fig. 12, View of Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* and Fernand Pelez's *Grimaces and Misery—The Saltimbanques*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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## Illustrations

*All photographs courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*



Fig. 1, Georges Seurat, *Parade de cirque (Circus Sideshow)*, 1887–88. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, View of the first gallery of *Degas: A New Vision* showing *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* and preparatory works for *Young Spartans Exercising* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Fig. 10, Circus advertisements. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 11, Honoré Daumier, *La Parade (The Sideshow)*, ca. 1865–66. Charcoal, pen and ink, gray wash, watercolor, gouache, and conté-crayon on paper. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, View of Seurat's *Circus Sideshow* and Fernand Pelez's *Grimaces and Misery—The Saltimbanques*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)