

EDGAR DEGAS

1834 - Paris - 1917

Portrait d'homme

Black chalk on paper; squared for transfer; c.1868
350 x 247 mm

PROVENANCE: Marcel Louis Guérin, Paris – Walter Feilchenfeldt, Zurich – Private collection

LITERATURE: Felix Baumann and Marianne Karabelnik (eds.), *Degas, Die Portraits*, exhib. cat., Kunsthaus Zurich and Kunsthalle Tübingen, London 1994, no. 99, p.340, repr. p.264

EXHIBITION: *Edgar Degas 1837-1917* (preface by Richard Kendall), Browse and Darby, London 1989, no. 2

This drawing is a study for the male figure in Degas's painting titled *Intérieur (Le Viol)*. The painting is an enigmatic and intriguing composition and ranks as one of his key works. It is now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art [fig. 1].¹ Degas's prosaic title, simply *Intérieur*, is misleading in that it makes no attempt to describe the relationship between the two figures depicted in the painting. When questioned, Degas went out of his way to avoid discussion of the subject. He spoke of the work simply as his 'genre picture'.² The alternative title, *Le Viol* [The Rape], also fails to throw light on the enigma of the painting's subject in that it associates the image with an act of violence not depicted, despite the evident conflict and disquieting tension between the 'suspect' and the 'victim'.³

From the outset it was precisely this absence of action in the painting that gave rise to a whole series of different interpretations. A number of critics attempted to identify a literary source for the scene.⁴ The identification suggested by Theodor Reff is the most convincing. He points to a similar scene in Emile Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin*, published in 1867.⁵ Thérèse and her lover, Laurent, meet to celebrate their wedding night one year after they have murdered Camille, Thérèse's husband. Although there are indeed a number of parallels between Zola's text and the painting, significant differences remain. Zola and Degas knew each other. However probable it may be that Zola's text inspired the image, the fact that ambiguity in Zola's account is absent fails to resolve the central enigma of the painting.

A number of preparatory studies for the work are documented. These are studies of the interior, the standing figure of the man at the door and the seated woman. With the exception of the present

¹ Paul André Lemoisne, *Degas et son Œuvre*, Paris 1946-9, reprinted: London 1984, II, p.184, no. 348. – See Theodore Reff, *Degas, The Artist's Mind*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1976, chapter V, pp.200-38 for a detailed discussion of the painting – Sidney Geist, *Degas' Interior in an Unaccustomed Perspective*, in *ARTnews*, LXXV, 8, October 1976, pp.80-2 – Susan Sidlauskas, *Resisting Narrative: The Problem of Edgar Degas' Interior*, in *The Art Bulletin*, LXXV, 4, December 1993, pp.671-96.

² In a letter to Marcel Guérin, Paul Poujard states that Edgar Degas showed him the painting in 1897 and described it as *mon tableau de genre*. Cited in Marcel Guérin (ed.), *Lettres de Degas*, appendix I, *Lettres de Paul Poujard à Marcel Guérin*, Paris 1945, p.255.

³ Werner Hofmann, *Degas und sein Jahrhundert*, Munich 2007, p.58.

⁴ For a discussion of supposed literary sources, see *Degas*, exhib. cat., Paris, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais; Ottawa, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988-9, no. 84, p.145.

⁵ Th. Reff, op. cit. p.203 f. – For the complete passage from Zola's novel, see *Degas*, op. cit., exhib. cat., Paris, Ottawa and New York 1988-9, p.145.

sheet, all the known preparatory studies are discussed and reproduced in Reff's essay (see n. 1). In all, Degas completed three pencil studies, two oil sketches and one pastel of the standing male figure. Both the pastel [fig. 2] and the present drawing are closely related in that they share a similar focus on facial features and expression. The handling of detail in the present sheet appears to have the closest relationship to the finished painting. It can very probably be regarded as the final preparatory study. The precise delineation of the facial detail and the squaring of the sheet in red both suggest that Degas used it when working on the painting.

The strongly characterized features with their intense, brooding expression have led to speculation as to the identity of the male figure. Ronald Pickvance has suggested that the figure may have been modelled on Henry Michel-Levy, a minor artist and friend of Degas. Degas was to portray him about a decade later in a painting titled *Artiste dans son atelier* (also titled *L'Homme et le pantin*).⁶ The standing male figure in this painting displays a very similar feeling of resignation and has the same sombre expression. A life-size female doll is depicted lying in a victim-like pose beside the male figure. However Reff questions this account, pointing to Degas's painting titled *Portrait de M. Roman*⁷ which depicts a childhood friend – M. de Saint-Arroman. The subject of the portrait bears a striking resemblance to the male figure depicted in the Philadelphia *Intérieur* and to the figure in the present drawing.

This drawing was formerly in the possession of Marcel Louis Guérin (1873-1948), an important art historian and collector. His outstanding collection of prints and drawings included a large group of works by Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec and Forain. He was the compiler of four catalogues raisonnés on the graphic work of Gauguin, Manet, Maillol and Forain. He also edited and wrote a commentary on the letters of Degas. The *Lettres* ran to twelve editions between 1931 and 1945 (see n. 2).

⁶ Lemoisne, op. cit., 326. – Oil on canvas, 40 x 28 cm. Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon.

⁷ Philippe Brame and Theodore Reff, *Degas et son Œuvre. A Supplement*, New York and London 1984, no. 51.

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Fig. 1: *Intérieur (Le viol)*, oil on canvas, c.1868-9, 81 x 116 cm.
Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, Philadelphia

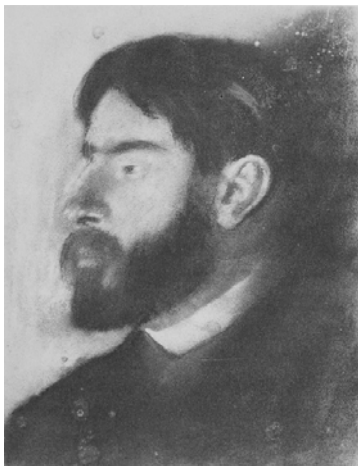


Fig. 2: *Tête d'homme*, pastel, c.1868, 340 x 270 mm.
(Lemoisne, op. cit., no. 349). Present whereabouts unknown