

# LE CLAIRE KUNST SEIT 1982

EDGAR DEGAS

1834 - Paris - 1917

*Sous-bois*

Pastel on paper.

Stamped lower left with the red signature stamp of the estate (Lugt 658).

352 x 264 mm.

PROVENANCE: The artist's studio – Fourth Sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris 2-4 July 1919, lot 28 b – Charles Comiot, Paris – Private collection, Paris

LITERATURE: Paul André Lemoisne, *Degas et son Œuvre*, London 1984, II, p.136, no. 280, repr.

*Sous-bois* belongs to a small group of experimental pastels of forest scenes made by Degas in the 1860s or early 1870s. Their specific origin and purpose is unknown. While some of them – including *Sous-bois* – may have been studies for horse-riding or outdoor figurative paintings in oil, others are equally plausible as essays in independent *plein air* composition. Trials of this kind reflected Degas's attempts to situate himself in the context of contemporary art in France in these years, as he began to develop a modest reputation in the circle of such painters as James Whistler, Edouard Manet and James Tissot, and others who would soon join together under the banner of Impressionism.

One clue to the genesis of *Sous-bois* is the use of pastel. Increasingly associated with Degas's mature career from the mid-1870s onwards, pastel was slow to establish itself in his studio practice. Around 1869, he chose pastel for two important departures; a group of modest scale portraits of family members and friends, and a series of landscapes. The portraits were richly developed and finely detailed, somewhat recalling the pastel techniques of the eighteenth-century masters who Degas's father is known to have admired. One of these works – *Mme Théodore Gobillard, née Yves Morisot* – was sufficiently accomplished to be accepted for the Paris Salon in 1870.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Degas's pastel landscapes of this period, by contrast, were rapidly executed during a vacation in Normandy in 1869.<sup>2</sup> Here the artist's handling is much closer to young pastelists such as Whistler and to practitioners of the previous generation, notably Eugène Boudin. In most of Degas's Normandy studies, colour is lightly and unevenly applied to compositions that are generally bright in tone. The hues of the paper remain visible in certain areas and the overall effect is that of informal 'sketches' of light and effects of atmosphere. Degas did not, however, use these works as the basis for more ambitious exercises in oil on canvas, but stored them in his studio for the rest of his career.

Distinct from these Normandy works, *Sous-bois* and the other pastels to which it relates most closely depend on markedly darker hues, in scenes that are set in forest clearings with light dimly perceived in the distance.<sup>3</sup> As such, they bring to mind the palette and the subject-matter of the Barbizon school of painters, but are arguably even closer to certain works by Gustave Courbet, an artist who

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<sup>1</sup> Lemoisne, op. cit., no. 214.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Kendall, *Degas Landscapes*, London and New Haven, 1993, ch.4.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Lemoisne, op. cit., nos. 122, 279, 280, 283, 285 and 286.

clearly interested Degas at this time.<sup>4</sup> One Courbet-like painting by Degas in particular, *Renard mort, sous-bois*, shows a woodland scene lit from the back with the trunks of several trees providing the setting for a dead fox, presumably killed by local hunters [fig. 1].<sup>5</sup> Executed in sombre greens and browns throughout, the painting suggests tragedy and isolation. A similar tonal range pervades other rural hunting compositions of the 1860s, though the appearance of family horse-riding parties sometimes lightens the mood.

The cluster of pastels to which *Sous-bois* is most clearly linked, however, is unified by the absence of domestic or wild animals of any kind and the rare appearance of human beings. Dominating them all is the world of the thicket or forest, where shadowy undergrowth is relieved only by reflections from ill-defined pools and the occasional patch of light filtering down from above. *L'Etang dans la forêt* [fig. 2], now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Madrid, contrasts the deep gloom of wild undergrowth with small, bright patches of light reflecting from such a pool and glimpsed through distant vegetation.<sup>6</sup> While *Sous-bois* shares some of these qualities, the wildness of *L'Etang dans la forêt* serves to emphasize the relative tranquility of *Sous-bois* and its placid, almost domestic atmosphere.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of *Sous-bois* is the presence at lower left of two lightly indicated figures, unique in the group of woodland pastels under discussion. While the identity of this pair is unclear, it is possible to see them as a mother and child, the former kneeling in a bluish full-length dress and the latter crouched by her side. The presence of these individuals and their calm woodland surroundings may suggest a park or even a large country garden, rather than a forbidding forest. Images of this kind were a staple of French art in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when figures were used to give scale to the natural setting and introduce a modest element of narrative to compositions of this kind. From Camille Corot to Berthe Morisot – both of them artists who were admired by Degas – such human presences brought animation and a sense of scale to their rural views. As social habits changed, they also reflected the increasing interest taken by bourgeois families in their natural surroundings and a growing fashion for healthy exercise in the landscape.

In this subtle sense, *Sous-bois* might be linked to a number of initiatives taken by Degas in the later 1860s and early 1870s to expand his repertoire of current subject-matter and respond to new developments in the Paris art world. These included the representation of family groups and children at the racetrack and beside the sea, informal compositions of parkland recreation, nannies with their charges, and well-known vacation sites. Although modest in size and never developed in a more substantial medium, *Sous-bois* thus belongs to the beginning of the Impressionist era as much as the period that preceded it. Comparison with Claude Monet's pastels and oil studies from Normandy, Pissarro's early canvases of Pontoise, and Morisot's garden and vacation sketches suggests that Degas too was using such small pastels and other works on paper to explore these possibilities for himself. The light, suggestive handling of colour in *Sous-bois* is especially telling, indicating a desire to evoke atmosphere and conjure up a briefly glimpsed scene, rather than attempt a definitive topographical statement of the landscape in front of him.

Richard Kendall

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<sup>4</sup> See Kendall 1993, op. cit., pp.76-9.

<sup>5</sup> Lemoisne, op. cit., no. 120.

<sup>6</sup> Lemoisne, op. cit., no. 285.

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Fig. 1: *Renard mort, sous-bois*, oil on canvas, c.1867, 92 x 73 cm.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen [inv. no. 1990.5.1]



Fig. 2: *L'Étang dans la forêt*, oil on canvas, c.1867-8, 33.5 x 41.2 cm.  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid [inv. no.: CTB.2000.65]