



c. 1884

Pastel on paper

Sheet: 34 11/16 x 19 1/8 inches
(88.1 x 48.6 cm)

**HILAIRE-GERMAIN-
EDGAR DEGAS**

French

Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen,
1948, 1948-31-1

THE MANTE FAMILY

Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) was an insider at the Paris Opéra, acquainted with musicians, composers, writers, librettists (a person who writes the words for an opera), choreographers, and of course, the ballerinas. Whether he was backstage, in the classroom, or in the audience, he always had his sketchbook. From his sketches Degas would produce portraits of noted Parisians as well as unknown dancers.

This pastel shows two young dancers standing with their mother. In the nineteenth century, young girls needed an escort to attend classes and rehearsals. Mothers acted as chaperones as well as providing practical help with costumes, shoes, sashes, and hair. Here the Mantes are probably standing in a hallway outside an examination room. Both sisters' feet are in a "turned out" position, reminding us they are both ballet dancers.

Degas knew the Mante family well; the father, Louis-Amédée Mante, was a double-bass player in the Opéra orchestra, and the young girls, Suzanne and Blanche, were students in the ballet classes. The sisters would later graduate to become members of the *coups de ballet* and perform on the Opéra stage. Like the family of the model for *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* (1878–81), the Mantes lived in the same neighborhood as Degas, the Montmartre section of Paris.

Degas usually made sketches and studies in preparation for his pastels and paintings of ballet subjects, but no such studies for this work have survived. It is possible this family portrait may have been created from a photograph taken by the girls' father, who was also an innovative photographer who contributed to the development of color photography. Degas is known to have used photographs as the basis for other portraits.

LOOKING QUESTIONS

- There is a mother and two young girls in this pastel work. What is the mother doing? How is the dancer in the tutu standing? Does she look happy, sad, or anxious? How can you tell? Look at her right foot. What is she doing with her toe? Do her hands express how she might be feeling?
- Why do you think the girl on the left is not dressed in a tutu? What is she wearing? Does she look older or younger than the other girl? What expression does she have on her face? Do the sisters look alike?
- Degas might have used a photograph of the girls and their mother to create this picture. Look at the family's expressions and interactions; does this look like a posed picture or a moment caught by a camera? Why?
- Look at the way Degas applied the pastel onto the paper. What kind of stroke does he use? Is it sketchy, thick, or thin? What colors does he use to highlight the figures and where does he use that color?
- Try standing in a "turned out" position with your heels together and your toes pointed in opposite directions. How long can you hold that position? Are you comfortable? Does the position put any strain on your legs or knees?