

# Edgar Degas

## *The Millinery Shop*

*Gloria Groom*

The source of ornament. Think of a treatise on ornament for women or by women, based on their manner of observing, of combining, of selecting their fashionable outfits and all things. On a daily basis they compare, more than men, a thousand visible things with one another.

—Edgar Degas<sup>1</sup>

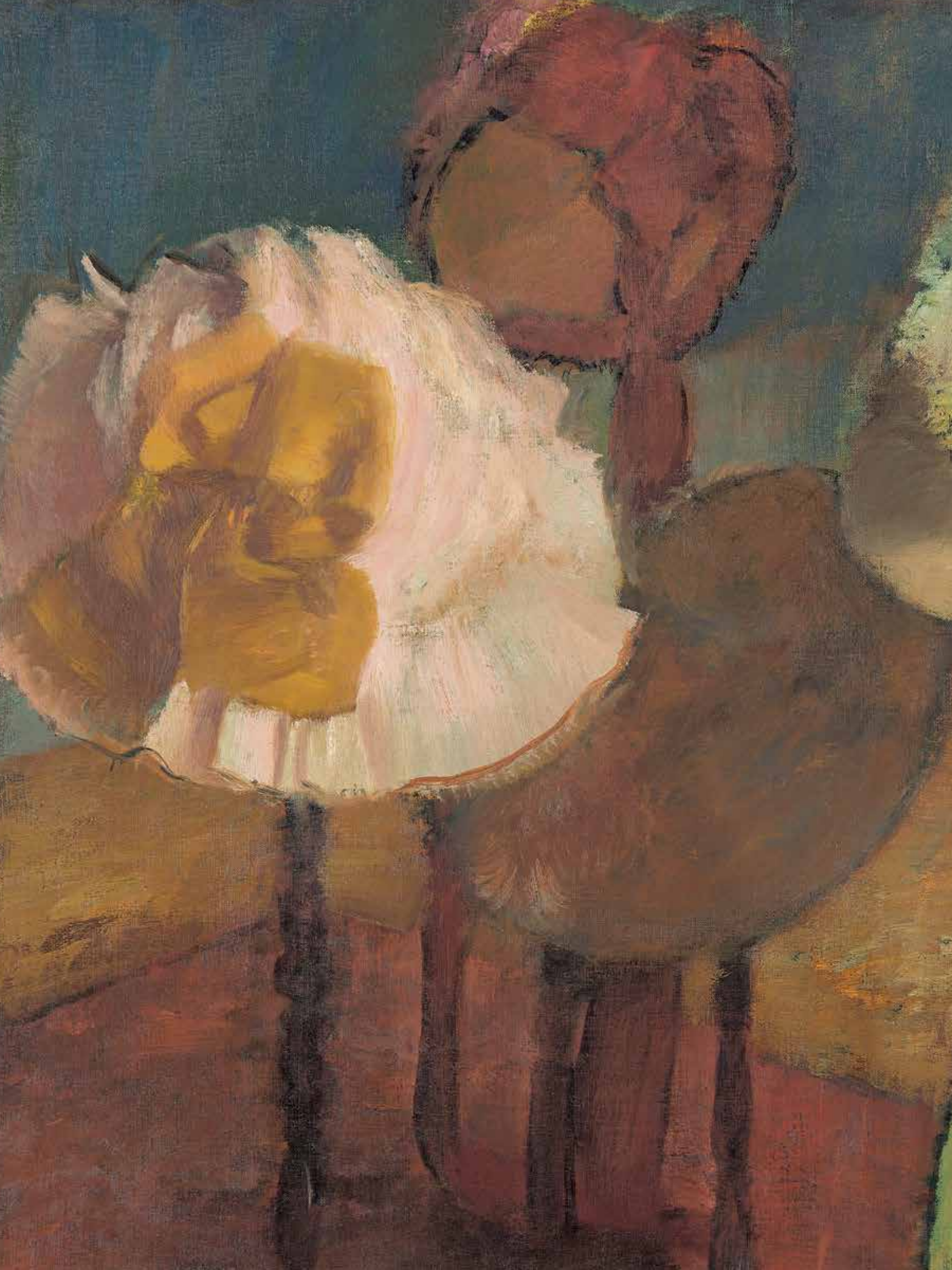
Edgar Degas's observations on women's ability to choose their dresses and accessories from a variety of possibilities presaged his active interest and participation in shopping. Indeed, he is known to have accompanied the artist Mary Cassatt and Madame Émile Straus (the cousin of his friend Daniel Halévy) on visits to dressmakers and millinery shops in the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>2</sup> Acutely attentive to women's fashion in general, he was most intrigued by the chapeau. The essential crown and status symbol of any respectable woman, the hat represented an independent accessory that nonetheless must be matched to her visage and outfit—an ornament to be admired, acquired, and above all held and tried on.<sup>3</sup> Unlike dresses, which could be all but manufactured—and, by the 1870s, made from how-to kits following basic patterns available in magazines—hats, even those in *grands magasins* (department stores), where they were displayed in separate rooms, were individualized and expensive (cats. 109–11). This fashion statement inspired Degas to create some seventeen pastels and four oil paintings. Apart from a “modiste” exhibited in 1876 at the Second Impressionist Exhibition (still unidentified), his works on the millinery theme can be divided into two categories: those made around 1879 to 1886 showing interchanges between customers and milliners; and

those dating from the 1890s through 1910, which were often reworked from earlier subjects and from which bourgeois clients were largely excluded.<sup>4</sup>

### LOOKING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF *THE MILLINERY SHOP*

The Art Institute of Chicago's *The Millinery Shop* (cat. 105) is Degas's largest and only “museum scale work” on this subject.<sup>5</sup> In this nearly square canvas, a milliner, seated at an angle beside a table of hats on wooden stands, studies the unresolved shape of a hat that is not completely decorated. She and the five hats on display to her right are depicted from a slightly elevated viewpoint, suggesting “the experience of encountering fashionable hats in a show window or inside the shop.”<sup>6</sup> The prominent pentimenti indicate that the composition evolved during the working process, with Degas scraping down and painting over many areas of the canvas. X-radiography of the work (fig. 1) shows that changes to the original composition relate closely to a series of pastels (now lost; see fig. 2). In two of these works, in addition to holding a hat, the woman wore a broad round hat and was clearly a customer.

Much has been written about this painting and others in which Degas blurred or skewed expectations of social types through costume and posture. Recent examinations using infrared reflectography (IRR) and X-radiography show that the figure in the Art Institute's canvas shifted position a number of times: two heads in three-quarter profile—depicted from a higher vantage point and set lower in the scene—are visible, contrasting with the final composition, in which the head is in profile



CAT. 105 Edgar Degas (FRENCH, 1834–1917)

*The Millinery Shop, 1879/86*

Oil on canvas

100 × 110.7 cm (39 3/8 × 43 5/8 in.)

The Art Institute of Chicago





**FIG. 1.** X-radiograph image of *The Millinery Shop* showing Degas's original composition.



**FIG. 2.** EDGAR DEGAS (FRENCH, 1834–1917).  
*At the Milliner's*, 1882–86. Pastel; 40 × 60 cm (18 1/8 × 23 5/8 in.).  
Location unknown, formerly Aubert Collection.



**FIG. 3.** Overlay of IRR image of *The Millinery Shop* and *At the Milliner's*, showing the correspondence between the original composition of the painting and the pastel.



**FIG. 4.** EDGAR DEGAS (FRENCH, 1834–1917).  
*The Milliners*, c. 1882. Oil on canvas; 60 × 74.9 cm (23 5/8 × 29 1/2 in.).  
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2005.14.



CAT. 106 Edgar Degas (FRENCH, 1834–1917)  
*At the Milliner's*, 1881

Pastel on five pieces of wove paper, backed with paper, and laid down on canvas  
 69.2 × 69.2 cm (27 ¼ × 27 ¼ in.)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

and appears higher on the canvas.<sup>7</sup> The IRR image most clearly shows features related to the figure in what was likely its second position. An overlay (fig. 3) with the outlines of the pastel drawing formerly in the Aubert Collection rescaled and laid over the IRR image shows a very close correspondence between these early designs and the pastel.

Equally noticeable in the X-radiograph and IRR images are changes in costume, indicating that the sleeve of the woman's dress was once trimmed with lace. The hat that she examines in the final composition was also much larger and more fully decorated. These changes suggest the stages in Degas's painting process, as he switched the woman from customer to milliner, although the details of this transformation remain ambiguous. In *The Milliners* (fig. 4), Degas painted over the original "customers," with their lace fichus and hats, with dark brown, making their transition to workers much clearer than in *The Millinery Shop*.<sup>8</sup> The Chicago composition subverts an easy reading:

the woman's olive dress, painted to suggest wool or another rich fabric, with its fur-trimmed collar and belt with silver buckle, is not obviously the garment of a *petite commerçante*.<sup>9</sup> Nor is the nature of her elbow-length glove unanimously agreed upon: For some it is a sewing glove or mitt and thus a clear indication of her status as an employee. And yet it appears to be a kid glove rather than one of the cotton gloves used by milliners to protect hats from oil.<sup>10</sup> It is thus not so dissimilar from the suede gloves worn by the young bourgeois lady who helps position her friend's chapeau in *At the Milliner's* (cat. 106).<sup>11</sup> Even the woman's lack of hat is not a definitive indicator of her social status, and the disembodied hats, the largest and most finished of which hovers directly above her head, suggest her association with, if not appropriation of, this symbol of bourgeois status and decorum. Perhaps the more compelling argument for seeing the seated female in *The Millinery Shop* as an employee rather than a visitor is her concentrated focus on the hat itself—an expression that Degas exaggerated through her pursed lips, which seem to be holding a pin.<sup>12</sup>

## IMAGING THE MODISTE

Unlike the series of bathers that Degas exhibited at the 1886 Impressionist exhibition, which was described as showing a peephole view from a male perspective,<sup>13</sup> the two pastels that he showed the same year on the millinery theme treat the business of hat-making and selling through the lens of the intimate relationships between producers, sellers, and consumers.<sup>14</sup> Degas was keenly aware of the "Béraud trap"—the risk of being overly narrative—and Degas's pastels of a milliner and her client (cat. 101), and a milliner and her apprentice (fig. 5), were considered Realist subjects and "nothing new" by reviewers of the 1886 exhibition.<sup>15</sup> They were read as representing the Parisian milliner and reflecting the morality and economic plight of this type of woman.

Like the danseuse and laundress, the milliner was considered ripe for moral ruin, since her wages were low and the prospect of making more money on the side was a very real temptation. Milliners

were doubly suspect, as were shopgirls (*femmes de comptoir*), because they catered to the moneyed classes and were constantly reminded of the luxury goods that they handled and promoted but could not afford. Eunice Lipton and Hollis Clayson described the milliner as a “tart” and cited contemporaries like Gustave Coquiot, who called Degas’s milliners “a very delightful group of Parisian coquettes.”<sup>16</sup> But the anonymous *Mémoires d’une modiste écrites par elle-même* (Memoirs of a Shopgirl Written by Herself), published in 1866, paints a bleaker picture of their status, underscoring the helplessness of modistes, who were often victims of shops’ wealthy owners or other male predators.<sup>17</sup> Whereas women employed in dressmaking establishments were among the highest paid of female workers,<sup>18</sup> modistes, as the critic Geffroy described the “anemic and ragged” figures of two pastels exhibited in 1886, “are surely those who earn two francs per day, composing hats at twenty louis, waiting to deliver them.”<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Degas, for whom the millinery shop was a recurring subject over thirty years, Pierre-Auguste Renoir rarely ventured into this thematic territory. His unusual 1877 pastel of a smiling milliner (cat. 107) defies any negative social reading. Framed by the hats on display through the plate-glass window, the milliner (also called *trottin* or apprentice) is shown leaving the store on her way to deliver the hatbox she holds. The rose in her hair matches the blossom on her bodice and serves as a substitute headdress for the ornately decorative hats she helps create but cannot own. Yet she is presented as a young woman enjoying the freedom of the street, outside the workroom or fitting area, and without a relationship to labor.<sup>20</sup> Although Renoir was deeply interested in women’s hats—suggesting to Madame Charpentier that he study them (along with dresses) “from life from all angles” for a special section for *La Vie Moderne*—the work of the modiste was a less compelling subject for him.<sup>21</sup>

## ARTICLES DE PARIS

Beginning in 1879, Degas used the term *articles* to denote the similarity between the accessories—gloves, hats, and fans—sold in the arcades and boutiques of Paris and the small, undemanding

works that he made for easy revenue.<sup>22</sup> In his millinery shop paintings, he equated the hat shop or *atelier de modiste* with the artist’s studio. Both represented the factory where hats and artwork—*articles de Paris*, or confectioned goods—were made to satisfy a specific market.<sup>23</sup> A decade earlier, in a letter to his favorite model of the time, Emma Dobigny, he mentioned having put out his shop sign, referring to his studio as an “établissement de bouillon,” and by extension to himself as a merchant of *bouillon* or a small shopkeeper of remaindered or returned items.<sup>24</sup> Degas’s reference to shop signs and to his *établissement* made it clear that he aligned himself with small merchants. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that his shopping trips with Cassatt and Straus included stops at the *grands magasins*, where males far outnumbered female shop clerks.

Although the most notable millinery shops were located in the rue de la Paix in the quartier de l’Opéra, the stores Degas depicted were never specified by name or identifiable imagery. In paintings like *At the Milliner’s* (cat. 106), the understated elegance of the decor and light-filled windows suggest that the setting may be an exclusive boutique above ground level, while the more spartan setting of *The Millinery Shop* (cat. 105) suggests a smaller boutique or even the work area of a hat shop. Unlike the art of Renoir—or later the photographer Eugène Atget, who showed window dressings with hats as seen from store exteriors—Degas’s *The Millinery Shop* and *The Milliners* show a view from the street set within the window frame, focusing on the creation of hats rather than the finished products. As in representations of artists’ studios, where finished paintings occupy the same space as unfinished canvases (usually with one nearly finished work on an easel), *The Millinery Shop’s* ornately executed and only partially finished hats exist side by side and are deftly arranged so that the scene is inviting to both male and female viewers.<sup>25</sup> In *The Milliners*, an earlier composition visible in an X-radiograph shows a table laden with decorated hats; this was painted over sometime before 1905 and replaced by the ribbons and trims in the finished composition, the elements of assembly and work.

Douglas Druick was the first to equate Gustave Caillebotte’s provocative refashioning of raw materials (meat) to the hero of Émile Zola’s



CAT. 107 Pierre-Auguste Renoir  
(FRENCH, 1841–1919)

*The Milliner*, 1877

Pastel on paper  
53.3 × 41.3 cm (21 × 16 ¼ in.)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

novel *Le ventre de Paris* (The Belly of Paris; 1873), Claude Lantier, who artfully arranges store windows so that they create a desire to consume.<sup>26</sup> A similar metaphor equating artist and *étalagiste* (window dresser) is suggested by Eva Gonzalès’s milliner-*apprêteuse* or trimmer (fig. 6), who is equally artful as she selects from her drawer the artificial flowers and ribbons that will be used for her hats, perhaps those on the stand and table to her right. The pink and blue flowers in the drawer harmonize with the blue of her dress, all of which are set against pale blue wallpaper decorated with a gold floral pattern. Her role as an active participant in the fashioning of a hat links her to the painter applying paint to his canvas. As Ruth Iskin pointed out in her extensive study of Degas’s hat shops, the milliner and artist have a common goal: “Each represents a different expertise, but both require careful looking.”<sup>27</sup> They are linked by the artistry (milliners considered themselves artists) and connoisseurship they bring to their work.<sup>28</sup> Degas often conflated the elements of hat-making with painting, and finished hats with artworks. On July 14, 1882, he sold the pastel now known as *At the Milliner’s* (cat. 103) to Durand-Ruel under the title *Hats Still Life*.<sup>29</sup> In this and other such works—*A Woman Seated beside a Vase of Flowers* (*Madame Paul Valpinçon?*) (1865; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), *Woman with a Vase of Flowers* (1872; Musée d’Orsay, Paris), *Diego Martelli* (1879; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires), and *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* (1886; Musée d’Orsay, Paris)—the still lifes are obvious, sometimes even foregrounded, but like the hats in the scenes of millinery shops, always embedded in a genre scene.

## HATS AND OTHER FASHION FETISHES

The connection between composing a painting and making a hat was not unique to Degas, and by the time of his millinery series, men, especially among the vanguard (including Édouard Manet, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Zola), had become increasingly interested in the representation of fashion commodities.<sup>30</sup> In his recollections of Manet’s keen interest in shopping, Antonin Proust wrote: “He spent a whole day in rapture before the



**FIG. 5. EDGAR DEGAS (FRENCH, 1834–1917).**  
*Little Milliners*, 1882. Pastel on paper; 48.9 × 71.8 cm  
 (19 ¼ × 28 ¼ in.). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,  
 Kansas City, acquired through the generosity of an  
 anonymous donor, F79-34.

**FIG. 6. EVA GONZALÈS (FRENCH, 1849–1883).**  
*The Milliner*, c. 1887. Pastel and watercolor on canvas;  
 45 × 37 cm (17 1/16 × 14 9/16 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago,  
 Olivia Shaler Swan Memorial Collection, 1972.362.



materials unrolled in front of him by Madame Derot. The next day it was the hats of a famous *modiste*, Madame Virot, that fired his enthusiasm. He wanted to compose a toilette for Jeanne, who became the actress Mademoiselle Demarsy.”<sup>31</sup> The tactile experience—both electric and erotic—of the encounter between the artist’s or consumer’s hand and an object, a recurring metaphor in Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (The Ladies’ Paradise; 1883), describes Degas’s own attraction to feminine fashion. According to Paul Gauguin, the artist went “into ecstasies before the milliner’s shops in the rue de la Paix, the charming laces, those famous touches by which our Parisian women drive you into buying an extravagant hat.”<sup>32</sup>

Edmund de Waal’s family memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), inspired by his relative Charles Ephrussi—a collector of works by Degas and the other Impressionists, as well as Japanese art—offers a poetic description of the pleasures of touching and handling tiny netsuke; his words are reminiscent of the language used by both Proust and Gauguin to describe the Impressionists’ passion for textiles, trims, and hats.<sup>33</sup> De Waal described the act of accessing the netsuke: “But the vitrine—as opposed to the museum’s case—is for opening. And that opening glass door and the moment of looking, then choosing, and then reaching in and then picking up is a moment of seduction, an encounter between a hand and an object that is electric.”<sup>34</sup> It is a description easily likened to entering an artist’s studio, where works could be held up for scrutiny, or a shop, in which the hats were intended to be handled.

Interestingly, Degas’s images of fashionably dressed women looking at and figuratively consuming works in picture galleries (cats. 125, 126) were made in the same period as his most intense engagement with the subject of milliners. Framed and behind glass, the hats in his paintings of store windows are reminiscent of his scenes set in galleries: both represent untouchable objects of desire and aesthetic consumption. Degas painted an intimate encounter, which, like the opened case of the netsuke, represents the “moment of seduction,” when both milliner and customer participate in the handling of the object of desire.

A recurring visual syntax for advertising hats, hairstyles, corsets, and other ingredients in





CAT. 108 Anaïs Toudouze (FRENCH, 1822–1899)  
 “Six Hats,” *La Mode Illustrée* 42 (December 19, 1880)

Steel engraving with hand coloring  
 36 × 25 cm (14 ¼ × 10 in.)  
 Private collection

feminine toilettes was the repetitive grid (see cat. 108). In Iskin’s words, these representations, “severing an item from its human context,” point to the fetishistic properties of fashion that were encouraged by the *grands magasins*, with their many specialized departments, each with its own “look.”<sup>35</sup> Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames*, whose publication in 1883 coincided with Degas’s interest in the millinery theme, acknowledges this new paradigm and the demise of the specialty boutique, such as the umbrella and walking stick business run by the novel’s fictional Bourras, who rails against Octave Mouret and his managers at the Bonheur des Dames: “The scoundrels are creating departments of flowers, millinery, perfume, shoes and I don’t know what else.”<sup>36</sup> Instead of going from one shop to another, hours were now spent roaming the departments within the multilevel *magasin*. Epitomizing this new female form of flaneurism is Zola’s *Madame Marty*, whose mania for buying frivolous and unnecessary articles at the department store nearly ruins her husband. Zola offered a vivid picture of her shopping frenzy, which involved,

CAT. 109 Hat, 1885/90

American  
 Dark brown silk velvet and brown silk faille  
 trimmed with light brown silk brocade ribbon  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

CAT. 110 Bonnet, 1887

French  
 Lavender straw and silk ribbon trimmed with  
 purple silk velvet and artificial thistles  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

CAT. 111 Hat, 1887

French  
 Brown silk velvet trimmed with ostrich  
 feathers and gold metallic thread  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



CAT. 112 Eva Gonzalès (FRENCH, 1849–1883)

*The White Slippers*, 1879/80

Oil on canvas, laid down on panel

23 × 32 cm (9 1/16 × 12 5/8 in.)

Vera Wang



spending an hour in the new millinery department, installed in a new salon on the first floor, having cupboards emptied for her, taking hats from the rosewood stands with which two tables were decked, and trying them all on with her daughter—white hats, white bonnets, white toques. Then she had gone downstairs again to the shoe department at the far end of one of the galleries, beyond the ties, a department which had been opened that very day. She had ransacked the showcases, seized with morbid desire at the sight of white silk mules trimmed with swansdown and shoes and boots of white satin with high Louis XV heels.<sup>37</sup>

Eliciting Madame Marty's "morbid desires" were the shoes displayed in glass cases. Unlike hats, which could be individualized and made to order, shoes were ready-made in generic styles. Gonzalès's paintings of white satin slippers and the pump popularized by Louis XV (cats. 112, 113) play to the fetishistic fascination surrounding this part of the wardrobe, which, in contrast to hats, was erotic because it clothed a part of the body that was never intended to be fully exposed.<sup>38</sup> In many of the Impressionists' intimate portraits (see pp. 107–23 in this volume), a mule or slippers dangling from the couch heightened the informal dishabille of the sitter. Although Gonzalès's paintings rarely showed her subjects' shoes peeking out from below their

CAT. 113 Eva Gonzalès (FRENCH, 1849–1883)

*The Pink Slippers*, 1879/80

Oil on canvas, laid down on panel  
26 × 35 cm (10 ¼ × 13 ¾ in.)  
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie  
Hopkins, Paris



CAT. 114 Henri Charles Guérard  
(FRENCH, 1846–1897)

*The Assault of the Shoe, 1888*

Etching, with open bite, in light red and black  
on cream laid paper

Image/plate: 16.7 × 25.2 cm (6 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 9 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.);  
sheet: 19.9 × 28.1 cm (7 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)

The Art Institute of Chicago



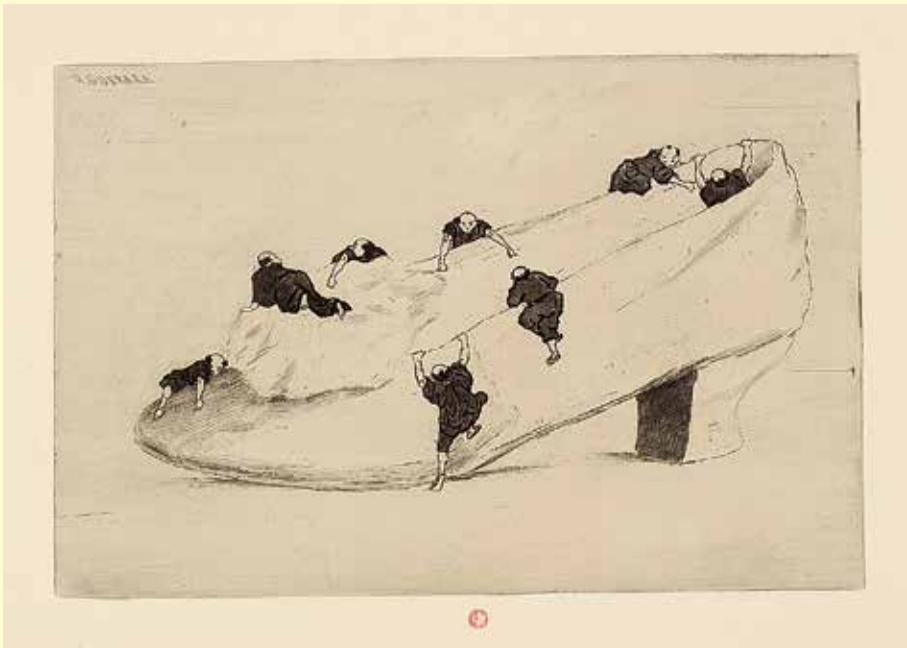
CAT. 115 Henri Charles Guérard  
(FRENCH, 1846–1897)

*The Assault of the Shoe, 1888*

Etching, with open bite, in black on cream  
wove paper

Image/plate: 16.7 × 25.4 cm (6 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 10 in.);  
sheet: 35.5 × 49 cm (14 × 19 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)

The Art Institute of Chicago



CAT. 116 Edgar Degas (FRENCH, 1834–1917)  
*Mademoiselle Marie Dihau*, 1867–68

Oil on canvas  
 22.2 × 27.3 cm (8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 10 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



CAT. 117 Edgar Degas (FRENCH, 1834–1917)  
*The Jet Earring*, 1876–77

Monotype printed in black ink on  
 white wove paper  
 Plate: 8.2 × 7 cm (3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 2 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.);  
 sheet: 18 × 13.2 cm (7 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





FIG. 6. STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ (FRENCH, 1842–1898).  
“The Virgil,” *La Dernière Mode*, October 18, 1874.

dresses, she seems to have had a personal association with shoes.<sup>39</sup> The date given for her painting of the white slippers suggests a possible link to her marriage to Henri Charles Guérard in 1879, while the pink pumps also appeared in an earlier painting entitled *The Harpist* (1873/74; private collection).<sup>40</sup> The personalized totemic potency of this fashion statement is evident in a series of six lithographic prints entitled *The Assault of the Shoe*, which Guérard created five years after Gonzalès’s death (cats. 114, 115). In these works, the pink silk pumps star in a sartorial saga as a shoe citadel besieged by Lilliputian Chinese men.

The erotic charge of footwear can be compared to other fetishistic or sartorial separations of commodity from content. Degas’s painting of the professional singer and instrumentalist Marie Dihau (cat. 116) highlights her fashion accessories, which together indicate a woman outfitted with travel necessities—carpeted travel bag, hat, and jewelry—but reveals little about her personality or physiognomy. The profile view accentuates her

anonymity, and as in Manet’s paintings of Méry Laurent and Jeanne Demarsy (cat. 104; fig. 2, p. 258), Marie is a mannequin, simply advertising the accoutrements of travel.

Degas’s series of fifteen small monotypes of women focusing on striped bodices, headdresses, and jewelry are more elusive nods to the fashion industry. In *The Jet Earring* (cat. 117), the technique—the result of drawing with greasy ink on a metal plate that is then pressed onto a paper surface for a one-off (monotype)—bears the artist’s touch, but the subject itself, a close-up of the back of a woman’s head, is indifferent and even more anonymous than traditional depictions of hair and headpieces in fashion magazines, such as Mallarmé’s fashion plate in *La Dernière Mode* illustrating the complicated “Virgil” hairdo, “an enchanting style for a dinner-party” (fig. 6). Degas’s version is more overtly nonrepresentational; it is objectlike, fetishized, and more still life than portrait.<sup>41</sup>

The admiration Degas expressed for the hand-wrought, his identification with the artisan, and his recognition of art as a commodity are most profoundly expressed in his millinery shop paintings, which are complex and evolved in meaning and style over time. Expressive of his appreciation of both women who create (milliners) and women who make aesthetic choices (clients), they also show the artist’s equation of carefully arranged handmade objects with artists who arrange compositions and colors. Like the picture frame—a functional and ornamental commodity that Degas fervently believed was the artist’s responsibility to conceive, select, and procure in order for it to harmonize and support the work of art—the hat played an essential role in balancing and completing a feminine ensemble.<sup>42</sup> His paintings and pastels of the millinery shop can be seen as his most accessible metaphor for the creative process and, indirectly, the fashion industry.<sup>43</sup>