



Turner

DEGAS: DISCOVERY OF A MAJOR UNPUBLISHED WORK FROM HIS ITALIAN PERIOD

Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione

Michel Schulman

Since the remarkable exhibition *Degas e l'Italia*¹ organized by Henri Loyrette, Degas' Italian period (1856–1860) has seen no major discoveries. Nevertheless, this period is widely regarded as a pivotal phase in his artistic development. The works of Degas created during his sojourns in Rome, Florence and Naples stand as a testament to his background and artistic evolution, with *The Bellelli Family*², held in the Musée d'Orsay, being widely regarded as his *magnum opus*.

1 *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione*, 1858–1859, oil on canvas, 153 x 105 cm, Private collection, [Ref. MS-2728](#) © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris.

Mostly a copyist in Florence, landscape painter in Rome, and portraitist in Naples, Degas also painted unexpected subjects from Italian society, such as the renowned *Roman Beggar Woman* (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery) and the *Old Italian Woman* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) (figs. 2-3). In addition to these, he created numerous drawings of unknown young people and subjects inspired by religion or history. The Italian art critic Diego Martelli (1838–1896), an eminent patron of the “Macchiaioli” and a friend of Degas, evokes this period: “when, for family reasons, and drawn by desire, he [De-



2 *A Roman Beggar Woman*, 1857, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 75 cm, Birmingham, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, [Ref. MS-888](#) © Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery



3 *Old Italian Woman*, 1857, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum, [Ref. MS-887](#) © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

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1 *Degas e l'Italia*, 1984

2 *The Bellelli Family*, a work begun in Florence in 1858 and completed in Paris in 1869, oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, inv. RF 2210, [Ref. MS-1260](#). See, *Maestà di Roma. From Ingres to Degas*, pp. 77–82.

gas] came to Tuscany and found himself right in the centre of his artistic ancestors: Masaccio, Botticelli, Gozzoli and Ghirlandaio. His cult became a fury, and a volume of drawings attests to the conscientious study he made, to appropriate all the beauties and teachings of art they possessed [...]”³.

It is precisely during this period and within this movement that the work discovered recently in Italy, which is presented here, can be situated. This work is confirmed as authentic, original, and autographed by Degas, by the author of this essay, as an expert on Degas and as the author of the first Degas digital catalogue raisonné⁴.

This work, which we have titled *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (fig. 1), is a major artistic discovery, adding to those already known and executed by Degas during his inaugural sojourn in Italy between 1856 and 1860 in the cities of Naples, Rome and Florence, which included brief incursions in Siena, Livorno, Viterbo, Orvieto, Perugia, Assisi and Turin⁵.

This portrait was to stand the test of time, intact with its original linen canvas and stretcher, avoiding restoration and relining. Although large, such dimensions (153 x 105 cm) are found in other paintings by Degas in the same period, and are sometimes even much larger. Below are a few examples:

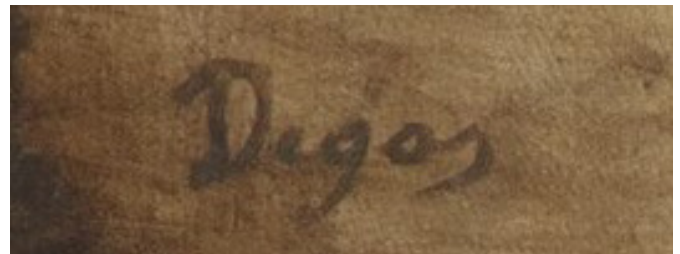
- *Saint-Jean Baptiste*, 1856, oil on canvas, 105 x 56 cm, Location unknown, [Ref. MS-1859](#);
- *Roman Beggar Woman*, 1857, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 75 cm, Birmingham, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, [Ref. MS-888](#) (fig. 2);
- *Young Woman with an Ibis*, 1857-1858, oil on canvas, 100 x 49 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum, [Ref. MS-880](#);
- *Young Spartans practising wrestling*, 1860, oil on canvas, 100.9 x 155 cm, London, National Gallery, [Ref. MS-107](#);
- *Portrait of The Bellelli Family*, 1860, oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, [Ref. MS-1260](#);
- *Young girls challenging young boys*, 1860, oil on canvas, 97.4

x 140 cm, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, [Ref. MS-1313](#).

Here, a pensive young woman - whom we have studied and presume to be Virginia Oldoini, the famous Countess of Castiglione - around the age of 21, holds her head slightly bent over her left hand, her arms almost crossed, while her left arm rests on her knees. Her pensive and troubled gaze directed upward, along with a complex and “coded” gesture, are elements of a posture that evoke a certain state of mind or a moment of intense reflection. A sunlight floods her face, revealing her dark grey bodice with blue-green highlights. Her baggy, yellow skirt conceals her crossed knees and barely visible feet. The young Countess is seated on a low wall flanked on her left by a stone column. This theatrical setting seems to evoke a fencing hall or the gallery of a palatial residence.

The signature

The signature is a key element in the authentication of this artwork. It was analysed by the Emmebi Diagnostica Artistica laboratory in Rome, whose expertise is recognised by many museums⁶. The analyses confirm that it fits perfectly into the painting: “*The signature, as can be seen in the macro-photograph, does not show any discontinuity in relation to the underlying pictorial texture [...] the painting and the signature were made at the*



4 *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (detail of the signature), 1858-1859 © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris

3 *Manoscritti artistici di Diego Martelli* (Florence, Marucelliana Library).
4 The work will be included in our digital catalogue raisonné under the title *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* with reference number [MS-2728](#).
5 Degas' Italian itinerary: On 17th July 1856, Degas arrived in Naples. He made numerous copies for the National Museum and painted the portrait of his cousin Giovanna Bellelli. On 7th October, Degas left for Civitavecchia and Rome, where he stayed until the end of July 1857. While there, he attends the evening academy at the Villa Medici and makes copies in churches and gardens of the Villa Borghese. At this time he painted the *Roman Beggar Woman* (Birmingham City Museum) (fig. 2). On 1st August 1857, Degas returned to Naples and stayed at San Rocco di Capodi-

monte, with his grandfather Hilaire Degas. In October, he returned to Rome (Sant' Isidoro) where he continued to draw in churches, galleries and streets of the city. On 24th July 1858, he left Rome for Florence. On the way he passed through Viterbo, Orvieto, Perugia, Assisi, Spello and Arezzo. On 4th August, he arrived in Florence and stayed with his aunt Laura Bellelli. He stayed there until March-April 1859, making occasional trips to Siena, Pisa and Livorno. On 10th August 1858, he applied for admission to the Uffizi Museum, where he made numerous copies (Florence, Uffizi Archive, sheaf LXXXII, part II, n° 130). Like Manet a year before, he wrote to the “Académie des Beaux-Arts” to “make studies in the cloister of the Annunziata”. At the end of March/beginning of April 1859, Degas left Florence for Paris, passing

through Livorno, Genoa, Turin, Mont-Cenis, Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, Lac du Bourget and Mâcon. On April 26th, Degas returned to Paris and lived with his father at 4 rue Mondovi, before moving into a studio at 13 rue Laval (now rue Victor-Massé). On 21st March 1860, Degas was back in Naples. On 2nd April 1860, he left for Livorno and then Florence, where he probably stayed for less than a month before returning to Paris.

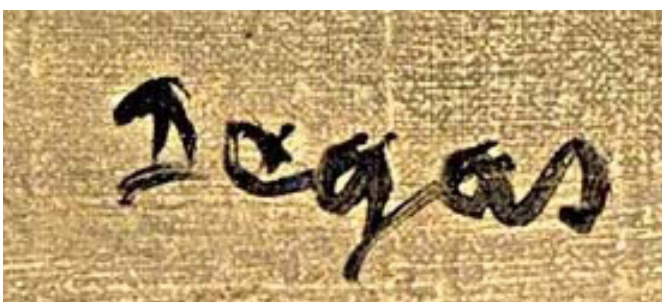
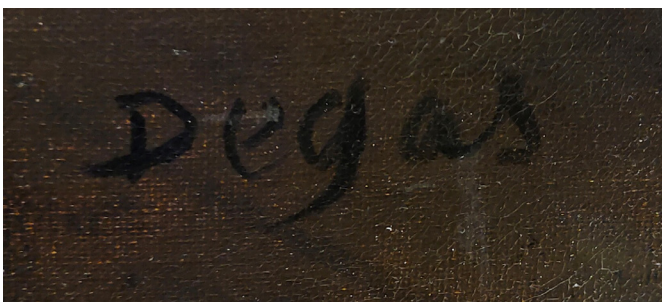
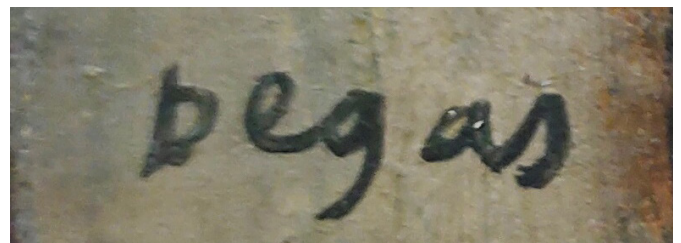
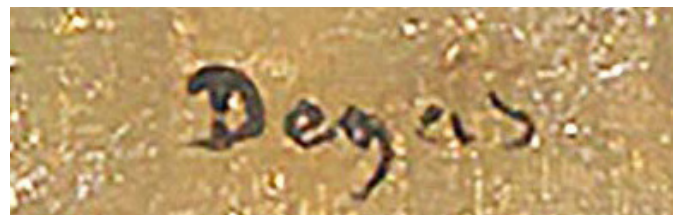
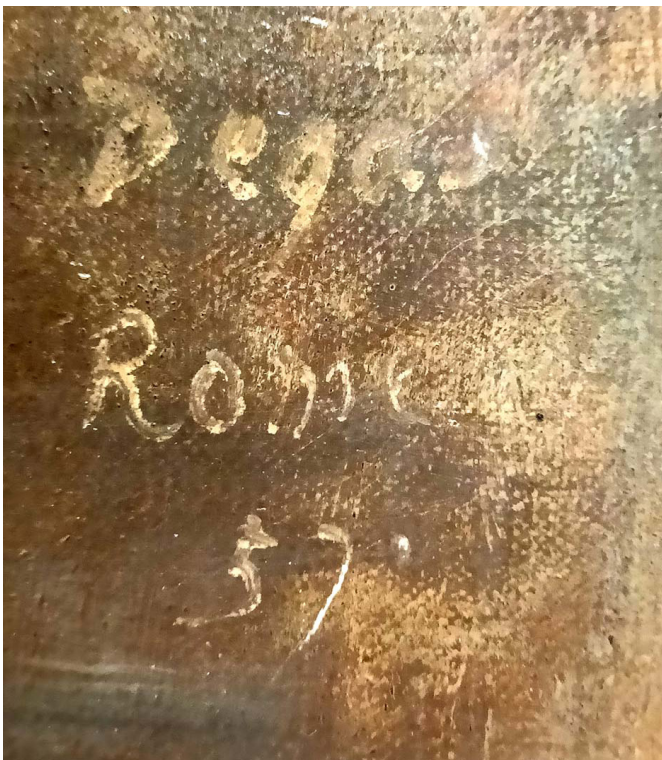
6 The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica (Palazzo Barberini), the Galleria Borghese, the Eglise des Français, the Museo Nazionale di Castello Sant'Angelo in Rome, the National Museum in Stockholm, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, work closely with the Rome-based analysis laboratory Emmebi Diagnostica Artistica.

same time” [Scientific report, Rome, September 5th, 2022]. A direct comparison between the signature of this portrait and those of other of his contemporary works is an important element to bear in mind. In this respect, we refer to the detailed study of Degas’ signatures that we have already published in our online digital catalogue raisonné (<https://www.degas-catalogue.com/signatures.html>). A comparative visual examination clearly confirms the authenticity of the signature and allows us to consider this work as an autograph. Although Degas’s signatures often vary, sometimes in a

surprisingly irregular way, the one affixed on the *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* closely reflects, or can indeed be clearly identified with some of those below.

The first is that of the *Old Italian Woman* (figs. 3, 5), held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to which Degas adds the place and date “Rome 57”, corresponding to the signature on our Castiglione.

Another similarity is to be found in the signature on the painting *Children on a Doorstep* held in the Ordrupgaard Museum in Copenhagen, painted in New Orleans be-



- 5 *Old Italian Woman* (detail of the signature), 1857, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum, [Ref. MS-887](#) © The Metropolitan Museum, New York
- 6 *Children Sitting on a Doorstep* (detail of the signature), 1873, oil on canvas, 60 x 73.5 cm, Copenhagen, Ordrupgaard, inv. 238.WH, [Ref. MS-1156](#) © Ordrupgaard Museum, Copenhagen
- 7 *Thérèse Gobillard* (detail of signature), 1869, oil on canvas, 55.2 x 65.1 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 29.100.45, [Ref. MS-795](#) © The Metropolitan Museum, New York
- 8 *Joseph-Henri Alès* (detail of the signature), 1868, oil on canvas, 25,1 x 20 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 29.100.181/ [Ref. MS-1899](#) © The Metropolitan Museum, New York
- 9 *Dancers in the rehearsal room with a double bass* (detail of the signature), 1882-1885, oil on canvas, 39 x 89,5 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 29. 100. 127, [Ref. MS-244](#) © The Metropolitan Museum, New York
- 10 *Portrait of Henry-Michel Lévy* (detail of the signature), Circa 1873, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 27.3 cm, Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, inv. 420, [Ref. MS-1414](#) © Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

tween November 1872 and March 1873 (fig. 6).

Other signatures can be compared with the first (figs. 7-9). The same observation applies to the *Portrait of Henry-Michel Lévy* at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon (fig. 10).

Provenance: Antonio La Rocca collection (Rome)

This work comes from a major private collection in Rome, the Antonio La Rocca Collection⁷, which was built up from the 1940s until 1971, when the collector died. It includes over a hundred works by artists who are widely regarded as “the Italians of Paris”. These include Boldini, Mancini, Zandomenoghi, de Nittis and many others.

Antonio La Rocca’s name is often mentioned in numerous catalogues raisonnés and monographs on this circle of painters. Most of the collection focuses on this group of artists personifying the young Italian Impressionist revolution, the “Macchiaioli”, who advocated a complete break with academicism and a return to realism through a new aesthetic that approached Impressionism despite a different sensibility. These artists were also closely linked politically and spiritually to the concerns of the Risorgimento, and were committed to the great social and political revolution that was to take place in the unified Italy of 1861. From 1855 onwards, they would meet informally at the Caffè Michelangiolo in Florence, a highly symbolic venue for meetings and discussions between intellectuals and artists, as well as collectors and writers who supported the Unification of Italy (fig. 11).

Our work here on Degas and its presence in the La Rocca collection is most relevant in this case. During his long stay in Florence (from July 1858 to March-April 1859), Degas frequented the Caffè Michelangiolo and took a

keen interest in the work and discussions of this group of artists. He became close friends with some of them, and would meet them again in Paris.

Later, at the turn of the 1950s, it would seem that Antonio La Rocca also turned his attention to contemporary painting, in particular that of Giorgio de Chirico, whom he met through artistic circles in Rome, acquiring eight of his works, one of which he donated to the *Pinacoteca Vaticana* in 1958.

Pictorial and social comparisons with works from the same period

Stylistically, the closest works are undoubtedly the *Old Italian Woman* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the *Roman Beggar Woman* from the Birmingham City Art Gallery and Museum (fig. 2-3). What is surprising about these two paintings is that Degas chose popular Italy at his inspiration, something that was not usual for him or in his cultural milieu, as highlighted in the exhibition catalogue Degas 1988: “[Degas] shows an undeniable originality”. In addition, the catalogue entry for the *Old Italian Woman* reads⁸: “[...] Painting Italians in costume had become a sort of commonplace to which all artists visiting the peninsula fell prey. The Birmingham painting expresses a realism close to Lombard naturalism, recalling the scenes of beggars by the Milanese painter Giacomo Cerruti (1698-1767) and the naturalism of Gustave Courbet for the painting housed in the Metropolitan Museum” (*Old Italian Woman*). This is what Gary Tinterow suggests in the notes to the work exhibited at Villa Medici in 2003⁹. *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* follows on from these two paintings, which are as subtle as they are unexpected. Here Degas was observing another side of Italian society, that of a certain bourgeoisie. Indeed, the young woman’s dress suggests that she comes from a rather affluent social class.

Degas’s chromatic palette is another key feature. Far from the bright colours of later years, Degas used a set of monochrome tones dominated by beige, brown and, in places, black. At the centre of this range, yellow reigns supreme, broken only by the dark grey of the bodice of the dress. In all three paintings, there is an identity of tone and a similarity to the colours of Degas’s palette at the time. These are not his usual shimmering colours, those of dancers, bathers and sometimes even horses, but the tones that characterise his early transalpine work, which can be discerned in several of his Italian



11 Plaque commemorating the Caffè Michelangiolo in Florence © Wikipedia 2007

7 The La Rocca collection (Rome), now completely dispersed, included (non-exhaustive list): 11 Boldini, Giovanni (1842-1931); 8 De Chirico, Giorgio (1888-1978); 1 Degas, Edgar (1834-1917); 6 De Nittis, Giuseppe

(1846 -1884); 10 Fattori, Giovanni (1825-1908); 2 Favretto, Giacomo (1849-1887); 6 Lega, Silvestro (1826-1895); 7 Mancini, Antonio (1852-1930); 4 Palizzi, Giuseppe (1812-1888); 2 Segantini, Giovanni (1858-

1899); 7 Signorini, Telemaco (1835-1901); 5 Zandomenoghi, Federico (1841-1917).

8 Degas, 1988.

9 Rome, Villa Medici, 7 March-29 June 2003, *The Majesty of Rome. From Ingres to Degas*, pp. 436-437.

works. The workmanship of our painting, however, differs from that of the 1857 paintings in New York and Birmingham. There are two explanations for this. The painting was undoubtedly sketched in the pencil, adding to its strength and originality. The second explanation is related to the date of the painting. Indeed, two or three years had passed since the New York and Birmingham works were executed, and in that time Degas had moved on from the academicism of his early days and had found new, more modern ways.

The multi-spectral infra-red images¹⁰ taken at the University of Bologna have enabled us to gain a better understanding of Degas's work as a whole, and of his brushwork, with its characteristic lines and the rapid rhythms of the brush, particularly in the zig-zag lines along the column to mark the folds, as well as the reflections and shadows on the back and the edge of the parapet.

There are obvious similarities between the *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* and the following works.

Backgrounds

Most of the portraits, and even some of the other subjects from his Italian period, are painted against backgrounds that are often dark, in monochrome tones ranging from brown ochre to shades of grey and black. The brushstrokes are quick and broad, moving back and forth, isolating the subject with a coloured counterpoint that reflects the light onto the model. These backgrounds define a space that is often abstract, dimensionless or subject to an almost geometric spatial organisation that projects the model forward. This is the case with our portrait, whose background is also treated as a flat, abstract space. We find this in certain works from this period, such as *Dante and Virgil at the Entrance to Hell*, 1857-1860, (oil on paper laid down on canvas, 32 x 22.3 cm, Private Collection, [MS-2072](#)) or *Portrait of a Young Woman, "Mme Millaudon"*, 1857-1859 (oil on paper laid down on canvas, 32 x 22.3 cm, Private Collection, [MS-806](#)).

The hands

In Degas's early portraits, the hands, when not hidden or ignored altogether, are often painted synthetically, with a sometimes sketchy outline, discreetly shaped by the colour. In the *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione*, the hands are virtually the main subject of the work, the key element of a narrative on which the artist's attention is focused. The brush-

stroke remains synthetic, however, as light and colour define the form rather than the drawing. At this time, Degas had a tendency to elongate hands, probably recalling the copies of Pontormo he made in that period. We find these similarities in the *Portrait of Marguerite de Gas*, 1858-1860 (oil on canvas, 80 x 54 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, inv. RF 3585, [Ref. MS-1257](#)) or in *Young Women with Ibis*, 1857/58-1861 (oil on canvas, 100 x 74.9 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 2008.277, [Ref. MS-880](#)).

Approach to Drapery

The study of drapery is part of any academic training and attracts the interest of most artists. By studying and copying them, even Degas took an interest in the subject, so much so that our portrait provides the perfect context and prompts us to explore his understanding of the past and convey his modern take on drapery. Indeed, Degas questions its real status through that of the skirt and its model. The artist indulges in an interesting exercise with a sculptural light, which becomes the shape in which the drapery becomes monolithic and mineral, like a block of stone in which the young woman is trapped. The folds are simplified and outlined with long strokes of colour; the shadows are reduced to a minimum. In *Old Italian Woman* (fig. 3), for example, we find the same universe, where the drapery is a volume whose weight both supports and defines the elderly woman.

Zig-zag pattern

From these years onwards, Degas's great modernity lay in the way he modelled light and colour using a zig-zag brushstroke visible in the light-receiving areas, on the young woman's skirt on the left column and on the low wall (fig. 1). Degas makes this light vibrate, in the form of repeated, criss-crossing scratches with an almost violent brushwork of rapidly drawn lines. This technique can also be seen in another work from 1859, *David and Goliath* (oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm, Cambridge (GB), The Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. PD. 7-1966, [Ref. MS-1886](#)), although it was still rare at the time. Degas would indeed develop it later. It seems to correspond to his recent exploration of light and colour, probably inspired by the work of the Macchiaioli whom he had just met in Florence.

Elements of appreciation for an attribution

We asked ourselves: how could the Countess of Castigli-

¹⁰ Emmebi Diagnostica Artistica, Scientific report, Rome, 5 September 2022, Analysis of multi-spectral images.



12 *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (detail), oil on canvas, ca. 1858-1859, 153 x 105 cm. Rome, Private collection, Ref. No. MS- 2728 © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris



13 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *The cape* (detail), 1860s, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.45 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

one have met Degas in Italy between 1858 and 1860? We searched his letters, his biographies, articles in the press of the time and books about his journey, but found nothing. Today, however, historical research relies on another tool that cannot be ignored: artificial intelligence with its powerful and incomparable search engines, which we used to study the Castiglione, bearing in mind that all the information retrieved needs to be verified. The software states that “Degas may have met Virginia Oldoini, who became Countess of Castiglione by marriage, outside the family circle”. This meagre clue was enough to arouse our curiosity and interest, which led us to consult the albums of the Musée d’Orsay, to which we are grateful. So how did she meet Degas? On what historical basis could this software have made such a suggestion? We compared this portrait with dozens of photographs of Degas taken by Pierson in the 19th century, bearing in mind that the Countess was the most photographed woman of her time and rarely portrayed live by painters. Sent by the minister Cavour to Napoleon III to win his support for the cause of Italian unity, she was rejected by the Emperor and ended up in Turin in disgrace between 1858 and 1860. Degas stayed there in 1859. The framing of the painting is almost photographic, reminding us of numerous photographs and daguerre-

otypes of this well-known figure from the years 1856 to 1899 in Paris. The pose, the shape of the face, the position of the hand, the curls of the hair have enabled us to surmise that this could be the presumed portrait of the Countess of Castiglione. We visited the Musée d’Orsay’s documentation centre to study and compare photographs of portraits of the Countess throughout her life and, on closer inspection, found many plausible points of comparison. The most obvious of these are the position of the hands, of both hands, including the very particular shape of the fingers and nails, their exact proportions, the pointed index finger, the shape of the mouth, a little pinched, perhaps irritated, and the melancholy look in the eyes (figs. 12-13).

It is on the basis of these converging clues that this identification is now more than “presumed”, hoping new documents or information will surface to bear out our identification and therefore our assumption.

In this respect, we will consider the following observations in the context of the creation of the Unification of Italy and the great effervescence surrounding the Risorgimento in Italy, notably in Turin in the years 1858-1860, as contemporary with the date of realization of this work.



14 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *The Funeral* (detail), 1860s, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.46 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York



15 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *Pose rehearsals* (detail), 1861-67, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 2005.100.423 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

Degas/La Castiglione: The meeting?

Degas was only 25 at the time and on the advice of Ingres, whose work he admired and whose advice he respected, he travelled around Italy to copy the great masters that he loved and considered an essential part of his training. His first stay in Italy lasted from 1856 to 1860. On his way back to Paris in 1859, he passed through Turin¹¹.

For her part, the Countess of Castiglione, who had fallen from grace, was forced by order of the Emperor to return to Italy. She therefore stayed at home in Turin, where she occupied the Villa Gloria on the heights of the city. It is estimated that she lived there between 1858 and 1861.

All in all, a meeting between Castiglione and Degas would not have been impossible. It is worth noting that the Countess was a major topic of current events at the time and that her unfortunate return was the focus of much attention, not to say criticism. Was the young

Degas aware of the Countess's situation during his stay in Turin? The conditions for a direct meeting with the countess or access to one of her photographic portraits were therefore possible, and then to execute this work. The light and the changes in the left hand suggest that the portrait was done on the spot. It is also probable that there was no meeting and that the painter interpreted a photograph in his possession, as has happened with some portraits or sculptures of the Countess by other artists.

Digitus rigidus

There is one detail that cannot be overlooked, being so peculiar as to be characteristic of the Countess of Castiglione. It is almost a signature, a distinguishing feature, a slight handicap that is always shown, never concealed and used for the purposes of staging. We are talking about the index finger on her right hand, which suffered

11 Reff, 2020, letter n° 7 of 26 April 1859, Vol. 1, pp. 124-126

12 The paralysis of the index finger of the Countess's right hand remains a complete mystery. Several sources, all more literary than historical, agree that this disability dates back to the Countess's early childhood, only the circumstances vary. One source

speaks of a carriage accident or an injury sustained after playing with a firearm, while another speaks of partial paralysis following an emotional shock. Whatever the case, the Countess made it an object of mystery that she used extensively in her productions.

13 Pierre-Louis Pierson was Napoleon III's photographer, but he was most famous for his collaboration with the Countess, of whom

he took more than 500 portraits under his direction. Their collaboration began in July 1856 and ended almost forty years later.

14 Musée d'Orsay, Department of Photographs. The Musée d'Orsay holds an important collection of photographs of the Castiglione by P. L. Pierson.

from paralysis¹² and was always shown straight, with the last phalanx unable to bend. The impressive collection of photographic portraits of the Countess by Pierson¹³, some of which are kept in the Musée d'Orsay¹⁴, clearly confirms that this arrangement of the right hand is a deliberate posture made in her exercises of self-representation. In our portrait, the position of the finger, which indicates the centre of the composition, is in itself the motif of the painting. It is not by chance or accident (figs. 12-15). In a lyrical flourish, Gabrielle d'Annunzio refers to it as the *dactylus of Polyclitus*, to be ranked as a supreme work of art alongside the finger of God at the centre of Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel¹⁵.

Degas's special care in this part of the work contrasts with the *unfinished* appearance of the rest of the canvas, where the brushstrokes are executed more quickly. The artist had second thoughts about the position of the fingers. Indeed, Degas most regrettably changed the position of the left hand, which was initially more outstretched¹⁶. Clearly, Degas portrays our model with the same arrangement of the hands, most notably the paralysed index finger of the right hand, as in all the photographs of the Countess taken by Pierson (over 500 in the Musée d'Orsay). This observation relates not only to the stiffness of her finger, but also to the way she positions her hands. This particular stage gesture can be observed and compared between the version painted by Degas and the early Pierson/Castiglione works of the period. In more modern terms, we would say that it is a case of 'copy and paste'. If there really was a meeting between the Countess, temporarily 'deprived' of Pierson due to his exile, and Degas, it is likely that she wanted to translate his early photographic compositions into paintings, in her own way and under her direction (figs. 12-15).

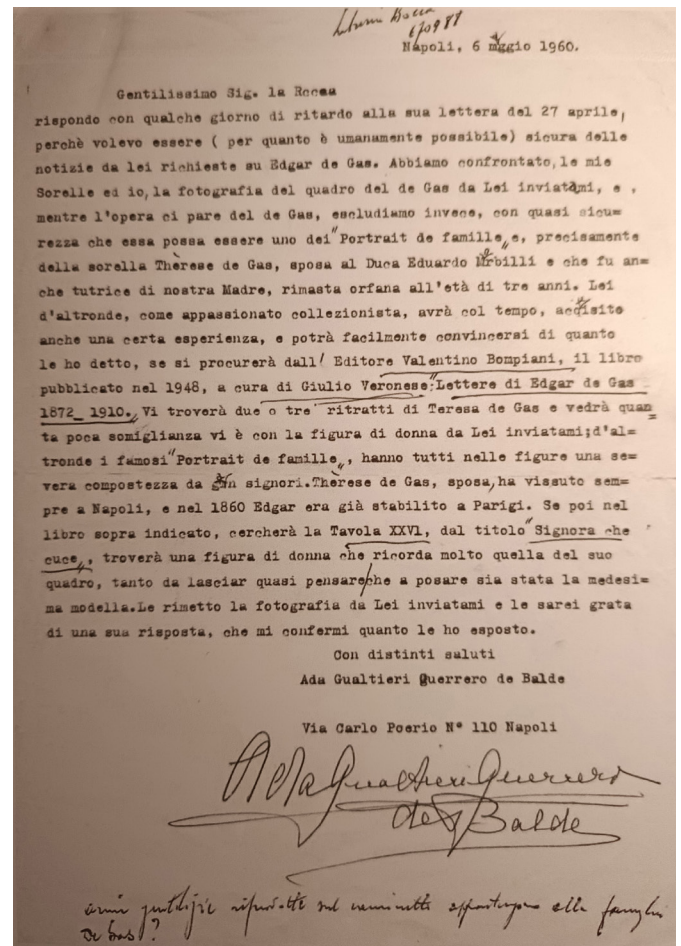
Portrait?

Apart from copies of the Old Masters and landscapes, Degas's Italian period is best known for his family portraits, painted during his stay in Naples, and for popular and social portraits of poor people, inspired by Lombard painting of the 19th century. The case of our painting is quite different. It is neither a peasant nor a social portrait and, according to Degas's descendants, it is certainly not a family portrait¹⁷. The person depicted here is clearly from a wealthy social background.

In a letter dated 6 May 1960, Ada Gualtieri Guerrero de

Balde and her sisters, all three descendants of the Degas family, ruled out the possibility that our painting was a family portrait. They did, however, confirm that the painting was indeed by their great-uncle Edgar Degas (fig. 16). If we analyse the compositional elements of this work one by one, we can see that it is a relatively isolated case in Degas's oeuvre. Was the young painter being guided? The Countess seems to have imposed herself as both model and 'director' of her portraits or (self)portraits¹⁸ as her contribution to the conception of her image was consistently deliberate. In the case of her collaboration with Pierson, we know that he was relegated to the role of technician, leading us to interpret the photographs not as portraits but rather as (self)portraits.

The Countess was to begin her association with Pierson in 1856 and was looking for ways to 'build an identity' through a series of portraits. She quickly ruled out paint-



16 Letter dated 6 May 1960 from Ada Gualtieri Guerrero de Balde to Antonio La Rocca

15 Montesquiou, 1913. It should be noted that Montesquiou collected almost all the photographs (433) of the Castiglione now kept at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, which can be consulted online.

16 Infrarouge photograph, see the repentance of

the left hand © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris

17 Letter dated 6 May 1960 from Ada Gualtieri Guerrero de Balde to Antonio La Rocca, Private Archives, Rome.

18 See Oberhuber, 2005.

19 George Frederic Watts, *La Comtesse de Castiglione par elle-même*. Quoted in: *La Comtesse de Castiglione par elle-même*, Paris, 1999, p. 64: "This painting is one of the rare painted portraits of the Countess that does not take its cue from a photograph taken earlier".

ing and sculpture, which required long and tedious poses, and wanted to avoid the artist's gaze and create her own image on her own. By deliberately moving away from the classical portrait, she wanted to impose her own staging. In 1857 in London, a posing session with the painter George Watts was quickly broken off; the painter could not bear his model's conceit and left his painting unfinished¹⁹. It was this kind of misunderstanding that led the Countess to turn exclusively to photography. What's more, in Pierson — a man known for his patience and accommodating character — she found the ideal partner for her photographic compositions, as he managed to put up with her demanding and capricious temperament. In the case of our portrait, it is therefore possible that the young Degas was also instructed to create an image, a stage script for an episode in the young Countess's romance-like life. The change in the position of the right hand, folded under the cheek and then unfolded over the temple, suggests this.

It seems that Degas was not celebrating the Countess's success, but rather her defeat. The various gestures of her hands may suggest the meaning of her 'role as a spy': with one hand she covers her ear, with the other she covers her mouth, while her forefinger and her gaze conjure up a secret message or even a threat. This gesture could be interpreted in a very didactic way as a sort of warning from the Countess: "I listen and keep silent" (fig. 17). In terms of iconography and in the Latin sense, the index finger shows, it denounces; for some, it is also used instead of the spoken word to express rejection.

The fullness of the dress accentuates the impression of withdrawal, retreat and reflection. The expression on her face is one of annoyance, defiance and melancholy. The sitter seems to want to control her frustrations and express her discomfort loud and clear. This tense psychological climate is conveyed by a palette of cold colours. The light, which overexposes the face, adds to the dramatic tension by dividing the space into two zones: the bright one dominated by the Countess (who holds her secret) and the dark one (which holds her fate) (fig. 1). Opposite spaces, where the light reveals a 'truth', where the shadow opens up an indefinite, obscure and not at all reassuring world. The model poses without accessories, jewellery or any of the other artifices or conventions of secular portraiture.

The construction of the work in two large intersecting di-

agonals gives the movement of the model the true theme of the painting. An 'inner struggle'. This is the main theme of all the iconography that the Countess subsequently developed in her extensive photographic oeuvre. It was this struggle that gave rise to her entire psychosis and life... We are in a theatrical setting, in an armoury decorated with a wall hanging of two crossed sabres and gloves worn by fencers. The sword on the left top right is clearly recognisable: it is a Lombard sword from the second half of the 16th century, attributed to the Milanese armourer Antonio Piccinino (1509-1589)²⁰. Depicted here in a combat stance, they symbolically represent her own struggles.

Among the Countess's struggles was her deeply wounded self-esteem after being rejected by Napoleon III. From the role of adored and feared mistress of the Emperor, and diplomat serving a national cause on the orders of King Victor Emmanuel, she became a repudiated woman, exiled in her own country and a failure. With immense bitterness, she wrote in her diary: "I have barely gone through life, and my role is already over"²¹. Her mission, which in all likelihood was her reason for living, was brought to a violent and premature end by the order of exile demanded by the Emperor²². Her return to Italy, to normality, to a life without 'roles to play', plunged the Countess into a deep depression. She returned to Turin, disowned, ruined and separated from her husband²³, still harbouring the vain hope of winning back not only the Emperor but also her place at the Imperial Court and her role as a national heroine. This is undoubtedly where Degas was able to paint her, sitting pensively in the sunlight.

Napoleon III's Italian campaign against the armies of the Emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph, was finally won at the battle of Solferino on June 24th, 1859. The Unification of Italy cause, in which the Countess had been involved, had finally become a reality, but the Emperor, during a brief visit to Turin, did not wish to see her again. This left her with a double wound: the definitive abandonment by her imperial lover and the rejection by her compatriots, who were unaware of her contribution, however small, to the victory of the Italian cause.

Another of the Countess's battles, this one more personal, concerns her personality and mental health. Defying her own demons, she seemed to be battling an incipient form of neurasthenia. It was at this point that she

20 See Angelucci, 1890, for a similar model, p. 245, series G42 (ill.).

21 Decaux, 1971, p. 169.

22 On the night of 5th to 6th April 1857, three armed Italian Carbonari, Grilli, Bartolotti and Tibaldi, attempted to assassinate the Emperor as he was leaving the home of the Countess Castiglione (swords possibly

depicted in our work as a reminder of this event). Wrongly suspected of complicity, she was officially expelled from France by secret agents in possession of a decree signed by the Minister of the Interior. Her expulsion also coincided with the Emperor's having grown tired of the Countess of Castiglione, thereby enabling Napoleon to seize this opportunity

to get rid of her and fall into the arms of his new mistress, Countess Marianne Walewska.

23 The couple split up after Castiglione's affair with the Emperor. The Count of Castiglione wanted to avoid the reputation of the cuckolded husband; quoted in Georges Blaziot 1951, p. 15.



17 *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (detail), ca.1858-1859, oil on canvas, 153 x 105 cm. Rome, Private collection, [Ref. MS- 2728](#) © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris

18 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *Série à la Ristori* (detail), 1860s, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.138 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

19 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *The Rosary* (detail), 1860s, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.37 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

20 Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), *Série à la Ristori* (detail), 1860s, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.137 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York



21 *Young Italian Woman: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (detail), ca.1858-1859, oil on canvas, 153 x 105 cm. Rome, Private collection, Ref. MS- 2728 © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris



22 Pierre-Louis Pierson, *Mathilde* (détail), ca.1860, Albumen silver print from glass negative. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.85 © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

began to seek help, unable as yet to identify the illness that afflicted her. On her return to Paris, she sought treatment from the man who was to become a close friend, Dr Esprit-Sylvestre Blanche, a Parisian alienist whose clinic was highly reputed. Dr Blanche's son, the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche, also knew Castiglione as a child, and later painted two portraits of her. At the same time, the deep and long-standing friendship between Degas and Jacques-Émile Blanche suggests that the two painters undoubtedly engaged in long discussions about her. Deprived of her political mission, the Countess had to reinvent herself through a long process of self-representation and elaborate photographic staging in order to give life to her own legend, which would take inspiration from her past. Degas gives us a finely crafted historical and psychological portrait that is rare in his oeuvre, in contrast with the 'bourgeois' or 'social' portraits he produced at the time. This work seems to be both a painted transposition of the Countess's scenic world, as we already know it from her early photographic work, and a masterpiece by Degas, who expresses here, in a pictorial language all his own, not the

portrait of a person but the portrait of a personality, of a situation, that has become historical (figs. 17-24). Degas signed a large-scale work that he left in Italy, either in the hands of his model or with his immediate entourage. Painted at the end of his trans-Alpine journey, this work is unique in his Italian oeuvre and should rightly be regarded as a major transitional work in which Degas abandoned academicism and emancipated himself from the lessons of the masters, proposing and experimenting with important innovations that would prepare and prefigure his work on his return to Paris. Together with *The Bellelli Family* in the Musée d'Orsay, it is one of the painter's first psychological portraits, using an elaborate form of coded writing that can be deciphered by imposing a critical distance between the sitter, the painter and the viewer. Years later, Degas no doubt remembered his early work. In 1875, at a Corot auction, he acquired a small work by Corot, entitled *Young Italian Woman seated, leaning on her knee*²⁴, which he kept until his death in 1917. Corot's painting astonishingly reproduces the composition and palette of his early work, probably a souvenir of his lost work and, who knows, of a particular encounter that he may have overlooked.

24 Corot Sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, March 25, 1918, lot 21. Now in the collections of the Louvre Museum, Paris, Department of Paintings, inv. RF 1636.

LEGEND

In the text, the indication 'Ref. MS-...' is a reference to the cataloguing of a Degas 'painting compiled by Michel Schulman in his digital catalogue raisonné: Edgar Degas (<https://www.degas-catalogue.com/>).

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23 *Young Italian Girl: Presumed Portrait of the Countess of Castiglione* (detail), ca.1858-1859, oil on canvas, 153 x 105 cm, Private collection, **Ref. MS- 2728** © Archives Michel Schulman, Paris



24 Pierre-Louis Pierson, *Marie Stuart*, ca.1860, New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1975.548.78 © Metropolitan Museum, New York