

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Edgar DEGAS (Paris 1834 - Paris 1917)

A Jockey Seen from Behind (Étude de jockey, vu de dos)

Pencil.

Stamped with the Degas atelier stamp (Lugt 657) in red ink on the former backing sheet.

Inscribed with the Durand-Ruel stock number Pb 1303 and numbered 2073 in blue chalk on the former backing sheet.

320 x 235 mm. (12 5/8 x 9 1/4 in.)

Although Edgar Degas is highly unlikely to have ever ridden a horse himself, his interest in the theme of horses and their riders lasted for almost the whole of his career. Between 1860 and around 1900, he produced around forty-five paintings and twenty pastels of equestrian themes, together with seventeen sculptures and some two hundred and fifty drawings of horses, almost all of which remained in his studio until his death in 1917.

The artist may have first experienced a horse race when he first visited his friend Paul Valpinçon at the château of Ménil-Hubert in Normandy in the autumn of 1861. Ménil-Hubert was close to both a small local racetrack at Argentan and the Haras du Pin, the French National stud, and Degas was to return to the area many times over the course of his life. By the later part of the 1860s Degas was frequenting the races at Longchamp, in the Bois de Boulogne in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. As the scholar Richard Kendall has noted, however, 'Despite the fame of Degas's racing pictures and his attachment to the subject for much of his career, almost nothing is known of the circumstances in which he made his equestrian drawings. Apart from some references in his letters and elsewhere to racetrack visits and trips to the country, there is not a single account of him drawing directly from a live horse. Adding to the

mystery is the huge technical and conceptual challenge of fixing the position of an animal in rapid movement, especially one in such unstable, unpredictable action...Degas apparently created these works from vivid recollections of the turf and the stable and a limited number of on-the-spot sketches, all reinforced by knowledge gleaned from other sources.'

Ronald Pickvance has written of Degas's racing scenes that 'Only rarely does he show horses cantering or galloping. And he never paints a finish. What indeed are we left with? Those moments before a start, when horses and jockeys are in suspended motion, either composed into tidy, processional formations towards the starter's flag, or more haphazardly disposed with markedly contrasting axes. And in both types of presentation, the well-controlled thoroughbreds are often contrasted with one intransigent, highly strung animal...Apart from two paintings by Manet of 1864 and 1872, Degas remained alone among the Impressionists in his choice of racecourse scenes.'³ As the same scholar further notes of the artist's preparatory process for one of these paintings, 'Element by element, stage by stage, he assembled his material. Separate drawings of the jockeys, some in pencil, some in brush and essence; separate drawings of the horses, sometimes as many as four for a single horse; then a compositional study of horses and riders, on the same size as the chosen panel.'

Between around 1867 and 1870 Degas produced a number of drawings of jockeys seated on their horses, seen from different angles, that he would use in his racecourse paintings of the next decade. As Pickvance has pointed out, 'None of Degas' pictures of the racecourse was painted directly from nature. He carefully built up his compositions from preliminary sketches and studies. This is nowhere more apparent than in his drawings of jockeys. In the latter half of the 1860s, he produced some 50 drawings of jockeys in the saddle, observing them from every conceivable angle and conveying the variety of bodily tension. Some were done in pencil, permitting a more precise contour, a more specific characterization, a more descriptive account of the silks; others were executed in brush and gouache on coloured paper; and yet others in essence on oiled paper, sometimes over a pencil drawing, this giving a more vivid, immediate, painterly effect.'

The present sheet is a study for the central figure in one of Degas's earliest depictions of a racing scene; a painting of Racehorses at Longchamp (*Chevaux de courses à Longchamp*), painted between 1871 and 1875 and today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As Michael Pantazzi has written of *Racehorses at Longchamp*, 'the painting represents a culminating point in a series of works devoted to the racetrack. This is a subject that Degas largely neglected after his return from New Orleans in April 1873, and only in the 1880s did he resurrect it to any extent. Very much unlike his earlier works of the 1860s, *Racehorses at Longchamp* anticipates a type of composition he was to refine at a much later date...The Boston painting is the most serene and poetic of Degas's earlier evocations of the races. In those compositions, he was apt to stress the atmosphere of nervousness around the track before a race, or the repressed energy at the first sign of a start. In *Racehorses at Longchamp*, horses are being taken on their round at a leisurely pace, at an unusual hour of the day – dusk. Were it not for the bright colors worn by the jockeys, the hint of fence rails, and the bolting horse at the far left – the one suggestion of animation in an otherwise even-toned cavalcade – this could be a pastoral scene far removed from the world of the racetrack.'

Degas based the main group of three horses at the right of *Racehorses at Longchamp* on a pencil drawing today in the Harvard University Art Museums, datable to the late 1860s, in which the same horses are shown in a different order. However, none of the jockeys in the Harvard drawing were used in the painting, and for these the artist instead employed an oil sketch on paper of *Three Jockeys*, sold at the third vente Degas in 1919 and later in a private collection in Paris, in which the same jockey seen in the present sheet reappears.

This drawing also seems to have been used for one of the jockeys in an earlier and smaller painting, *Before the Race* of c.1871-1872, which Degas sold to the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in April 1872 and is today in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Degas was not averse to reusing motifs, however, and the same jockey appears in a handful of later racing scenes, notably the painting *Before the Race* of 1884 in the Detroit Institute of Arts and a pastel of *Racehorses* in a Landscape, dated ten years later, in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Madrid.

In keeping with most of his drawings and paintings of racing subjects, which depict the moments before or after a race, Degas has here concentrated on the relaxed pose of the seated jockey and the way in which he sits on the unseen horse beneath him, capturing something of the synergy between horse and rider. Among comparable drawings is a pencil study of a seated jockey seen from behind and turning to the left, of identical dimensions and technique, which was sold in the fourth and final vente Degas in July 1919 and was in an American private collection in 1973.

The present sheet was acquired in the 1940s by the politician David Alexander Robert Lindsay, 28th Earl of Crawford and 11th Earl of Balcarres (1900-1975). At various times a trustee of the Tate Gallery, the National Gallery, the British Museum, the National Galleries of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland, as well as serving as Chairman of the National Trust and the National Art Collections Fund, the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres was also a noted collector of modern art.

Literature:

London, Browse & Darby, *Degas: drawings, bronzes & monotypes*, 2004, no.14.