

## Degas at Le Vésinet racecourse

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Images of horses and horse-racing were important elements in the early career of Edgar Degas (1834–1917). From c.1861 through to 1865 he had experienced informal provincial race meetings,<sup>1</sup> painted a number of racing scenes,<sup>2</sup> and in 1866 successfully submitted a painting, *Scène de steeple-chase*, to the Paris Salon.<sup>3</sup> Although the static forms of the horses in his earlier works were anatomically sound, often based upon antique models and prints and paintings of artists such as Anthony van Dyck, Théodore Géricault, and Alfred de Dreux,<sup>4</sup> a limited understanding of a moving horse's anatomy was revealed in the Salon painting.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than scenes of a horse-race spectacle, it was that subject of the racehorse and jockey to which Degas continually returned and mastered through to the early 1900s with sketches, paintings, pastels and sculptures.

During the late 1860s he continued to make sketch studies<sup>6</sup> and two paintings of that time, *The False Start* (Fig.1) and *Le défilé (The Parade)* (Fig.2), show jockeys and their horses gathered before a race start in front of the same grandstands at an unknown racecourse. Degas often juxtaposed the imagery from different locations into the one work, but a preparatory drawing of a grandstand, with a notation for the artist's future reference, *The Grandstand* (Fig.3 – not reproduced here),<sup>7</sup> was clearly made directly from the one depicted in both paintings and provides an unambiguous pointer to a specific and actual locale. Although the depicted racecourse has until now not been identified, it has often been thought connected to the *Hippodrome de Longchamp* in the *Bois de Boulogne*, the public park bordering the western edge of Paris.<sup>8</sup> Race meetings at Longchamp became major events for Parisian society and, as a result, the venue became synonymous with the sport. Not only did artists appropriate the name for titles of works that had little to do with the setting, but art historians since have also tended to assume that, if the depicted venue of a work was either not known or unable to be identified, then the venue was probably Longchamp.

The grandstands depicted were in fact at the *Hippodrome du Vésinet*, situated to the west of Paris between Chatou and Le Pecq, and set around *Le Grand Lac* in the *Parc du Vésinet* as shown on the plan in Figure 4.<sup>9</sup> As indicated, they were located on the western side of the track and a wash

drawing by Henry Johnson (Fig.5) confirms the form of the two grandstands, with their distinctive roof profiles, and the central pavilion, as seen in the paintings. What Johnson's drawing does not depict accurately is the flat terrain of the racecourse and the surrounding *Parc du Vésinet* as it was then and has remained to the present with the residential development.

The racecourse had been inaugurated at Le Vésinet in 1866 with a crowd of 6,000 spectators at its first meeting and its grandstands were first used in the 1867 racing season.<sup>10</sup> As a rail line had existed between Paris and Germain-en-Laye since 1837, with the Le Vésinet station available in addition to Le Pecq after 1862,<sup>11</sup> it was very accessible for those Parisians seeking the popular spectacle of horse racing. Events were held regularly until August, 1870, when they were suspended with the onset of the Franco-Prussian war, and then recommenced in March, 1872.<sup>12</sup> With it known that *The False Start*, already held by then in a private collection, was sold to the art dealer Durand-Ruel in that same month,<sup>13</sup> then the study drawing for that painting was more than likely made from the motif before the course's closure in August, 1870. It would then seem likely that both paintings were also produced before that date. After the racecourse closed in c.1892, the grandstands, pavilions and stables were purchased in 1894 by the City Council of Illiers, south-west of Paris, when establishing a new racecourse.<sup>14</sup> A *carte postale* of 1912 (Fig.6) shows one of the grandstands and the central pavilion in place there. The course and grandstands no longer exist at the location near the now-named Illiers-Combray.

Although the locale in both *The False Start* and *Le défilé* is identified as at Le Vésinet and the scene depicted in *The False Start* is seen as an almost direct translation from the preparatory drawing, the wider view of *Le défilé* shows Degas's typical technique of introducing elements from elsewhere for pictorial effect. The industrial chimney stacks seen in its background, for example, are unlikely to have existed in the rural area to the north of the racecourse and the Parc du Vésinet and to the west of the village of Montesson.

This identification of the *Hippodrome du Vésinet* reveals a new dimension to Degas's contact with the equine world. Its modest setting allows the informal scene depicted in those two early paintings to be understood. And, rather than the more developed and crowded *Hippodrome de Longchamp*, it was also the more likely locale for Degas's many graphite and mixed media studies of jockeys and spectators made during the late 1860s.<sup>15</sup>

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## NOTES

1. These resulted, in part, from visits to his friend Paul Valpinçon and family at Ménil-Hubert in Normandy, near the Haras-le-Pin breeding establishment. The first of these was made in September – October of 1861. For details of his visits to Ménil-Hubert see: J.S. Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998, pp.38, 39, 41.
2. Such as *Jockeys at Epsom* (1859–60; Collection of Mr. and Mrs. H. Anthony Ittleton), *At the Races: the Start* (c.1861–62; Fogg Museum, Harvard University Art Museums), *On the Racecourse* (1861–62; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel), and, *Course de gentlemen. Avant le départ* (1862, reworked c.1882; Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
3. Paris Salon No.520: "Scène de steeple-chase"; now held in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, as *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* (1866, reworked 1880–81 and c.1897; Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon; Inv. no. 1999.79.10).
4. For examples and discussion of studies made during this period, see Boggs, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 16–37, 45, 47–49, and including Figs.7, 9, and 23, and Catalogue illustrations no.1 and 7.
5. It also depicted the traditional 'flying gallop' mode with paired outstretched forelegs and hind legs set above the ground. It was not until 1878, when Eadweard Muybridge published his instantaneous photographs of a horse in motion, that the sequences of legs during a trot and gallop were understood.
6. For examples and discussion of studies made during this period, see Boggs, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.82–103, including Figs.54–59, inclusive, and Catalogue illustrations no. 40–48, inclusive.
7. Contact with the present owners of the drawing has not been possible and, as a result, it cannot be reproduced here. The drawing is reproduced in: Boggs, *op. cit.* (note 1), 'cat.54. *The Grandstand...*', p.99., and, T. Reff, *Manet and Modern Paris*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1982, Fig.74, p.146.
8. Theodore Reff, for example, has noted of *The False Start* that "of all his [Degas's] pictures presumably set at Longchamp, only this and one other, the *Jockeys before the Reviewing Stands* ..., show the stands and spectators", and that "the straight line of the eaves, clearly shown in contemporary images of Longchamp... is changed in both pictures to a broken line rising in the center"; and, of the preparatory drawing that "Surprisingly, it [the grandstand] is already altered in the drawing made on the spot... presumably to overcome the sense of monotony Degas must have felt even while standing before the long structure"; Reff, *op. cit.* (note 7), 1982, p.146.

9. The plan shown is a composite of details derived from numerous plans but the main source was the plan, *Commune du Vésinet, Arrachement du plan général du Vésinet*, 1876 (Archives communales du Vésinet), which showed a planned land development for the replacement of the racecourse and its surrounds. The track layout shown is possibly more extensive with the loops on the southern side than when inaugurated in 1866.
  10. Patrick Vazeilles, 'Les Ibis du terrain de manoeuvres au champs de courses', *Le Vésinet, Revue municipale*, 1984, no.66 (pp.52–54); no.67 (pp.60, 61), no.68 (pp.76, 77).
  11. See R.L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, & Parisian Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1988, pp.196, 197. Herbert also discusses the establishment of Le Vésinet by Alphonse Pallu and notes the inauguration of the racecourse in 1866 (p.197).
  12. Vazeilles, *op. cit.* (note 10).
  13. The sale date was 4 March, 1872. See Boggs, *op. cit.* (note 1), No.55 – *The False Start*, p.252.
  14. File 2-O-1810, Archives départementales d'Eure-et-Loir, Chartres.
  15. See Boggs, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.87–103.
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