

Dégas At Last Comes Into His Own

WHILE the second drive by the Germans, in the great battle of Flanders was in progress the other day, the contents of the studio of Edgar Dégas were disposed of in Paris, by public auction, and fetched the astonishing sum of a million one hundred thousand dollars. This was a sign of French confidence, of French judgment, and of French belief in the genius of the nation, even at a moment when it might have been supposed that the people would have no interest in things spiritual, in view of the situation involving life or death, that then confronted them.

It would be vulgar to measure the gifts of Dégas by the figures indicated by the tap of the auctioneer's hammer. But, all the same, the grand total shows to what an extent this shy, almost hermit artist has come into his own. As late as the close of the nineties, Americans, who had been converted to a belief in the art of the Impressionists, were still dubious about Dégas. Those who accepted Manet, Monet, Renoir, Pissaro and Sisley, did not accept him. His work was known and prized, by the few; but it still puzzled the many. Edgar Dégas remained, for years, a painter's painter.

In his subjects and in his manner, he did not compromise. He was a revolutionist, yet he was a classicist. He was a realist, and at the same time an idealist. Like the early Christians he was in the world, but yet not of the world. Dégas could not have done his work had it not been for his sympathetic contact with the art of earlier days.



This head—the canvas is called "La Savoisienne"—was brought to America this year by Messrs. Durand Ruel. It is a fine example of the earlier manner of Dégas. What Ingres was to the Romanticists, Dégas was to the Impressionists—a draughtsman first and a colorist afterwards. He never tells a story and he never shows an emotion. Despite the cabals of the ignorant, and the jealousy of his contemporaries, Dégas has at last been admitted to the company of the immortals

DÉGAS was born in 1834, at the beginning of the great new era in French art. He owed nothing to the schools, which he despised. His real teachers were the pictures in the Louvre. As a boy he copied the masterpieces of Ghirlandaio, Holbein and Lawrence with such startling fidelity that we now realize to what an extent genius, in his case, consisted in not doing what he could do easily. Without trying he could have conciliated the Academy and won countless patrons. But he preferred to lose the world and save his own soul. His door was barred to the collector, the critic and the state functionary. Almost alone among modern French men of genius he died wholly undecorated.

After a visit to America, while the Civil War was on—commemorated by his painting the "Office of a Cotton Warehouse at New Orleans"—Dégas joined, in the year 1865, the so-called Batignolles group that used to meet at the Café Guerbois. Here he listened while Renoir, Monet, Fantin, Guillaumin, Cazin, Pissaro, Whistler, Stevens and Zola talked about their art theories. Dégas contributed to the famous exhibition of the Impressionists in the Rue Pelletier, which drew jeers from the public and from those in authority. That ended all such appeals for public favor on his part. From then on he withdrew into his studio and stayed there; the world forgetting and—as it seemed—by the world forgotten.

He has at last come into his own—as all true geniuses are bound to do.