

My favourite painting Luke Irwin

L'Absinthe by Degas



L'Absinthe, 1876, by Edgar Degas (1834–1917), 36in by 29in, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France



Luke Irwin is an award-winning rug designer

‘I first saw this when I was 17 and living in Paris. I was so struck by the sense of place and time. More than that, I was intrigued by the desolation of the two figures. What was their relationship? Obviously, it was one of great familiarity to encapsulate such *ennui*. But is it *ennui* or simply stunned shock? Are they a brother and sister who have just had bad news? Husband and wife? Or simply two people in a drunken bond? The composition and use of brushstroke is very suggestive of the drunken state, the fractured nature of a hangover, the pause for thought before the first drink of the day. I love her shoelaces and his truncated pipe—such simplicity conjures up their shabby existence. I love the fact that he’s looking at something more interesting than what is in front of or beside him. To my impressionable eyes, this contrived snapshot of a previous era was beguiling and romantic in a way that only a 17 year old can view doom and desolation.’

John McEwen comments on *L'Absinthe*

DEGAS was born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas. In French, the pronunciation remains ‘D’ga’ (as in De Gas), but, because of this elision, in English, we invariably say ‘Daygar’. His father was a Parisian banker, his mother a Creole from New Orleans. She died when he was 13, a loss that may have accounted for his fascination with women yet failure to find a mate.

On passing the Baccalaureat, he registered as a copyist at the Louvre, but his father, a notably cultured man, insisted he study law. His heart wasn’t in it and, following

a meeting with Ingres, his favourite living artist, he opted for the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Ingres told him: ‘Draw lines, young man, and still more lines, both from life and memory, and you will become a good artist.’

Like his hero, he spent a prolonged period in Italy copying the works of the Renaissance masters. This traditionalism set him at odds with his Impressionist contemporaries and their obsession with light and landscape. Although he exhibited in Impressionist exhibitions, he preferred to call his Parisian-inspired subjects ‘Realism’.

One modern craze was drinking absinthe, a potent aniseed-tainted spirit distilled to taste with water. With an alcoholic content as high as 80%, in bohemian circles, it promised inspiration, but was condemned as a plague and eventually widely banned. Degas’s painting, originally called *In a Café* (still the Musée d’Orsay’s title), caused a scandal in France and later in London. The models were the actress Ellen Andrée and Marcellin Desboutin, an artist he had met in Italy. Such was the furore, Degas had to state publicly that they were not alcoholics.