

The Singular Multiple

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The sketchbook that Degas used from roughly 1859 to 1864, today known as *Carnet I*, is one of the largest of his career and attests to the stunning diversity of the young artist's formal and technical interests.¹ On its pages we find loosely drawn sketches in pencil and more finely rendered ones in pen, some of them deepening and blooming under layers of translucent pigment, with pasted alongside them experimental etchings, photographs, tracings, and even pressed flowers. *Carnet I* is of particular interest in its documentation of the artist's long-standing concern with various forms of reproduction, and of his predilection for exploring and subverting some of the terms by which reproduction was understood in the mid-nineteenth century. These operations would become essential to his later monotypes. Years before he turned to that medium, he was already using *Carnet I* to examine the relationship between unique and multiple, original and copy, and repetition and transformation.²

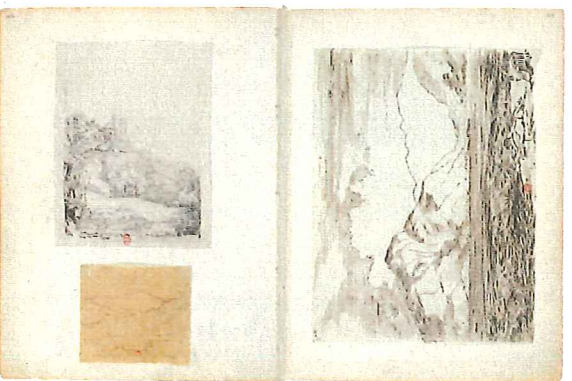
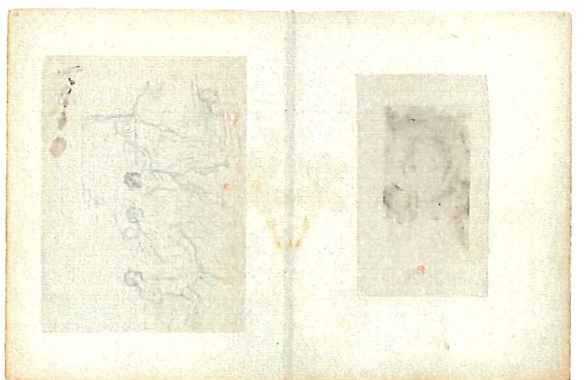
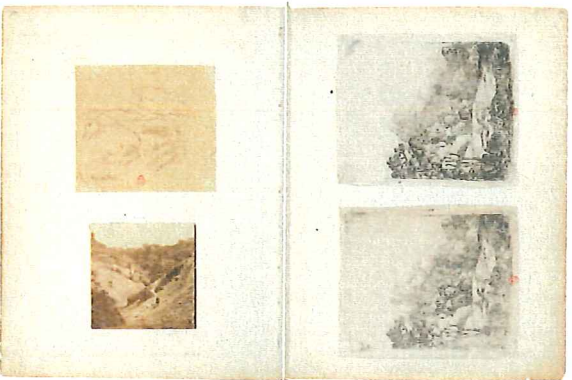
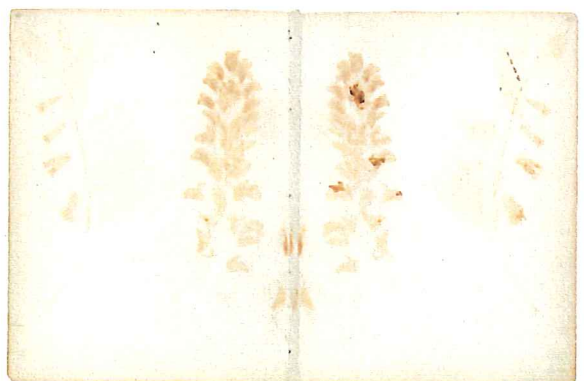
In recent years, art historians have come to recognize that mechanical reproduction meant many different things in nineteenth-century France.³ It encompassed an ever-growing body of commercial prints, book and journal illustrations, and photographs, but it also included forms of manual reproduction that had been employed in artists' workshops for centuries. Replicas, variations, copies, and imitations proliferated in this context, with each type of reproduction having its own artistic and monetary value.⁴ As *Carnet I* attests, Degas was working during a period in which these modern and traditional forms of reproduction were densely entangled.

Degas affixed some of his earliest prints to the pages of this notebook, including three trial impressions of a single etching, *Rocky Landscape (Paysage rocheux, c. 1856)*. On one sheet, of the print in its first state, Degas used pencil and ink to draw in the changes he would make for the second state (plate 3, left col., bottom, image at upper left). On the recto of

the same page he included two variant second-state prints, a crisply inked impression on top and a fainter, blurred impression below (plate 3, left col., second from bottom). By pasting them together in the notebook, Degas showed the three prints as multiple stages within a single working process.

Another etching in the notebook is a copy of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's portrait *Jenny de Lavalette*, from 1817 (fig. 1). Fittingly, Ingres was an artist for whom copying was of profound importance: "Is not a good copy," he once asked, "worth more than a bad but original painting?"⁵ Unlike the three impressions of *Rocky Landscape*, Degas's etching of *Jenny de Lavalette* is blotchy with surface tone and marred by cancellation lines (plate 3, right col., bottom, right). In these early experiments in printmaking he followed the example of artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn, who famously executed variant prints that darken and metamorphose through multiple states. Simultaneously, though, Degas confronted a modern marketplace of industrially produced imagery, emerging in high volume and exerting a considerable pressure on traditional forms of printmaking.⁶ Yet his etchings differ emphatically from mass-produced, largely identical prints, an insistence quite visible in the selection he preserved in *Carnet I*—indeed he seems to have valued these works for the ways in which they do *not* resemble one another.

Degas's early etchings are "singular multiples." The implicit contradiction in these terms points to an underlying tension between originality and reproduction in nineteenth-century printmaking.⁷ Although reproductive mediums such as engraving ostensibly generate identical copies of a single image, artists were increasingly drawn to forms of printmaking that produced nonidentical copies—prints that became unique works in their own right. In this context, printmaking did not actually "reproduce" a composition—it *altered* it. The means by which printmaking transforms an image would preoccupy Degas for decades, and would become central to his



3. Sketchbook (*Carnet I*). 1859–64

Ink, graphite, charcoal with scrapbook additions including photographs, intaglio printing and pressed flowers
10 × 7 1/16 in. (25.4 × 19.5 cm)

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Département Estampes et photographie

monotypes: as he pursued a given composition through several pulls, re-inkings, counterproofs, and pastel-covered cognates, the act of reproducing an image was made inseparable from the act of changing it.

Much of the reproduction seen on the pages of *Carnet 1* belongs to a long tradition of copying that became a cornerstone of artistic education at Paris's Académie des Beaux-Arts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸ This pedagogical model was rigidly sequential and hierarchical. Students began by copying simple line engravings, then increasingly complex ones, after which they could move on to drawing from plaster casts and paintings and eventually to drawing from live models. Although Degas studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts only briefly, he was committed to this method. Over forty years after his time at the Ecole, the art dealer Ambroise Vollard asked him how an artist should learn to paint, and received the reply, "You must copy and recopy the masters . . . only after having provided every proof of being a good copyist could one reasonably allow you to do a radish from nature."⁹

Even before enrolling at the Ecole, in 1855, Degas had replicated its pedagogical model on his own: he had begun to make copies from prints in the Bibliothèque Impériale and from paintings in the Musée du Louvre in 1853.¹⁰ He also soon began to draw copies of contemporary paintings; *Carnet 1* includes one from Eugène Delacroix's *Ovid among the Scythians* (*Ovide chez les Scythes*), which he would have seen at the Salon of 1859. Many such copies fill the pages of the notebook, from an elaborate drawing of a sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry to a simple tracing from a print of *Le Concert champêtre* (c. 1509) in the Louvre, a painting long attributed to Giorgione but now given to his assistant, the young Titian (plate 3, left col., second from top).

This latter tracing testifies not only to Degas's respect for the Beaux-Arts tradition of the *copie* but to the flourishing mid-nineteenth-century print market that enabled old master paintings to circulate in unprecedented ways. On the notebook page, Degas drew a frame around the pasted tracing and added two spectators, who seem to be looking at the image as if it were the original painting in the Grande Galerie of the Louvre.¹¹ An engraving that reproduced a painting was roughly and partially reproduced a second time, as a tracing. Through these layers of mediation, much of the content and all of the masterful facture of the

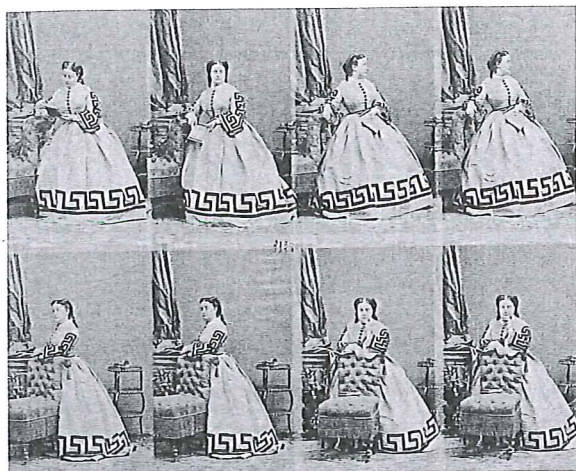


1. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. *Jenny de Lavalette*. 1817. Pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (16.1 × 11.5 cm). National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

original image were lost—yet Degas, flipping copy and original, affixed the result to an imagined museum wall in place of the work that it so poorly copied. And copies, even poor copies, could provide opportunities for envisioning new works. When Degas turned to the monotype, over a decade later, the act of breaking down an image (through the ink loss inherent to the monotype process when a print is pulled more than once) became a starting point from which new forms could be created. This offered yet another challenge to the traditional understanding of reproduction: rather than preserving a composition, printmaking could bring about its destruction.

Alongside his Beaux-Arts copies Degas placed examples of a novel and relatively young reproductive medium: modest landscape and portrait photographs (plate 3, left col., second from bottom). A more important engagement with photography, however, takes place in the form of a drawing. On page 31, a large sketch in pencil and brown ink depicts two women within a rectangular frame (plate 3, left col., top). An inscription to the lower left reads "Disdéri photog." This caption defines the drawing as a copy of a photograph by André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, who attained great success with *cartes de visite*, calling cards featuring a small portrait photograph of the bearer (fig. 2).¹² The forms of the two women are conjoined; their heads face out toward the viewer while their bodies are at angles to each other. They are paired but distinct.¹³

Degas outlined this scene in decisive lines of brown ink that bled through the paper and on the other side—page 32—produced a faint copy that reversed the composition (plate 3, right col., top).



2. André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri. Portraits of Princess Gabriella Buonaparte. c. 1860–65. Albumen print sheet of uncut *cartes de visite*, 7 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 9 $\frac{5}{16}$ in. (19.8 × 23.7 cm). Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Gernsheim Collection

This copy appears to have inspired a new drawing directly across from it, on page 33, the right side of the spread. Here, at the center of a page littered with smaller pictures, Degas drew a woman in profile, her pose and dress resembling one of the subjects Disdéri photographed—not as she appears on page 31, though, but reversed, in imitation of the faded composition that has bled through to page 32. This new drawing gave Degas the opportunity to exaggerate the bend of her head and the swoop of her torso. He probably first copied the photograph as an aide-memoire, a way to preserve the image for future reference, but in the process of translating it into a sketch, then inverting that sketch and copying it in a second one, it gave him a way to explore the possibilities of repeating and reversing an image. He also subtly registered the effect of emerging industrial processes on traditional artistic media such as drawing. Despite his evident interest in photography, however, Degas did not try his own hand at the medium until around 1895.¹⁴

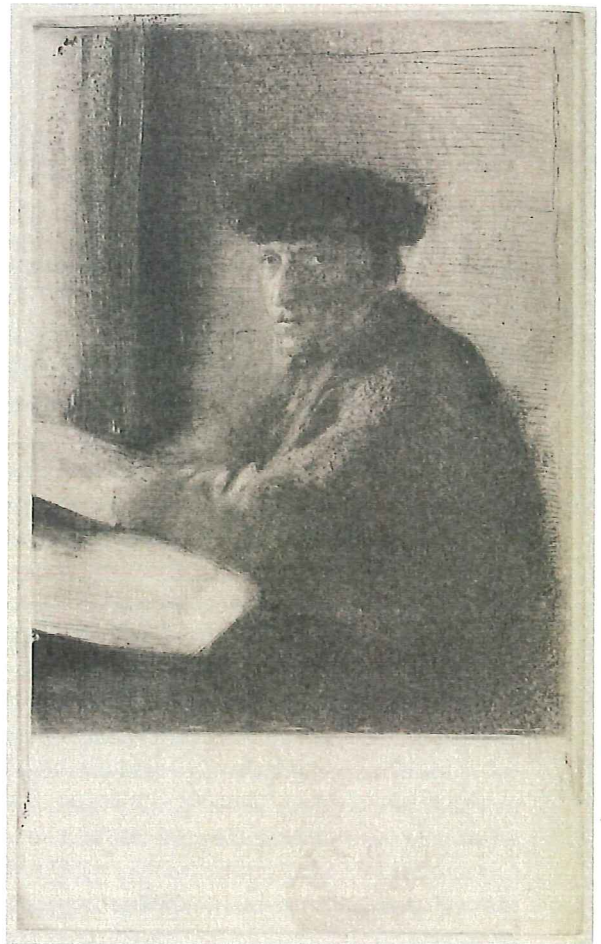
Carnet I reminds us that the radical formal and technical experiments that Degas undertook in his monotypes grew out of his enduring fascination with the changing terms of reproduction in the nineteenth century. In this context, even the simple flowers preserved between its pages echo the printing press's exertion of flattening pressure. The diverse works preserved in the notebook demonstrate that copying an image can also mean transforming it; that in Degas's time traditional Beaux-Arts practices lay adjacent to a rapidly modernizing marketplace of images; and perhaps also that, in the words of the art historian Michel

Melot, for Degas, "in printmaking as in painting, there is no such thing as reproduction."¹⁵

1. Theodore Reff, whose catalogue *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) remains the definitive source on Degas's notebooks, dates most of the drawings to between 1859 and 1861, but he identifies one that cannot have been made before 1864. See 1:6 in his book.
2. For more on the rise of originality as a privileged concept in nineteenth-century art, see Richard Schiff, "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Yale French Studies* no. 66, *The Anxiety of Anticipation* (1984):27–54, and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985).
3. One of the most important contributions here is Stephen Bann's *Distinguished Images: Prints in the Visual Economy of Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
4. The terms and their definitions are drawn from Patricia Mainardi, "The 19th-century art trade: copies, variations, replicas," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2000):62–73.
5. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. Raymond Cogniat (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1947), 24:80. On Ingres and copying see Patricia Condon, Marjorie B. Cohn, and Agnes Mongan, *In Pursuit of Perfection: The Art of J.-A.-D. Ingres*, exh. cat. (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1983). Krauss explores some theoretical implications in "You irreplaceable you," in *Retaining the original: multiple originals, copies, and reproductions* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989; *Studies in the history of art* 20):XX.
6. One of the most recent contributions to this field is Anne Higonnet's "Manet and the Multiple," *Grey Room* 48 (Summer 2012):102–16. In addition to the other sources cited in this essay, see also Trevor Fawcett, "Graphic Versus Photographic in the Nineteenth-Century Reproduction," *XXX* 9, no. 2 (June 1986).
7. As Sue Welsh Reed and Barbara Stern Shapiro have observed, *Carnet I* reveals that the boundaries "between reproductive and original print were less strictly drawn than the publicly advanced positions would suggest." Reed and Shapiro, *Edgar Degas: The Painter as Printmaker*, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), p. xxii.
8. See Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the 19th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
9. Ambroise Vollard, *Degas* (Paris: G. Crès, 1924), p. 64. Author's trans.
10. See Jean Sutherland Boggs, *Degas*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), p. 71, and Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 35–50.
11. See Reff, "The Pictures within Degas's Pictures," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 1 (1968):126.
12. As Reff has noted, Degas could have seen Disdéri's works exhibited at the Société française de Photographie on the rue Drouot in the winter of 1861. *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 2:93. See also Reff, "The Pictures within Degas's Pictures," p. 126.
13. Ailene Loucheim discusses Degas's use of this compositional strategy in her essay "Degas's Double Vision," *Artnews* 46, no. 1 (March 1947):26–29, 61–62.
14. See Richard Kendall and Jill DeVonyar, "Eye and Camera: The Late Years," in *Degas and the Ballet: Picturing Motion* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011). Also valuable is "Some Documented Links between Degas and Photography," pp. 256–59.
15. Michel Melot, *The Impressionist Print*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 45.



4. *The Engraver Joseph Tourny (Le Graveur Joseph Tourny)*. 1858
 Etching on paper
 Plate: $9 \frac{1}{16} \times 5 \frac{11}{16}$ in. (23 × 14.4 cm)
 Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of James H. Lockhart, Jr.,
 Class of 1935



5. *The Engraver Joseph Tourny (Le Graveur Joseph Tourny)*. c. 1865
 Etching on paper, only state
 Plate: $9 \frac{1}{16} \times 5 \frac{11}{16}$ in. (23 × 14.4 cm), sheet: $18 \frac{7}{8} \times 12 \frac{3}{8}$ in.
 (48 × 31.5 cm)
 Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe



6. *The Engraver Joseph Tourny (Le Graveur Joseph Tourny)*. 1857

Etching on paper

Plate: $9 \frac{7}{16} \times 5 \frac{11}{16}$ in. (23 × 14.4 cm), sheet: $18 \frac{15}{16} \times 13 \frac{13}{16}$ in.

(48.1 × 35.1 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund