


<p>Edgar Degas, <i>Women Ironing</i> ca. 1884-86, oil on canvas, 76 x 82 (30 x 36")</p>	<p>Initial analysis</p>	<p>The oil paint is laid directly on an unprepared, coarse canvas which provides a grainy, uneven support. The brown linen, visible under the paint in places, gives a thick rough texture and helps make the pastel colours vibrate.</p>
<p>On the left a worker takes a break with a bottle of wine and she stretches with her left hand behind her head and yawns.</p> <p>The diagonal made by the edge of the work bench from the left hand corner to the right hand edge slows down the dynamic visual experience of the activity. This is compatible with tiredness expressed by the woman on the left. There are four variations of an almost identical composition in this series, with one figure yawning and the other leaning heavily on her iron. The picture in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (used in this analysis) is the third variation in the set.</p> <p>In another three but different examples by Degas of a woman ironing, the work bench, or in one case ironing board, has always been depicted in this orientation, but in these cases the single working figure has been depicted to the right of the bench or ironing board and to the right of the picture.</p>	<p>The room they in is divided behind them by a vertical beam. On the right a stove in the corner and a second wall.</p>  <p>The bottle held in the lefthand figure's right hand is three-quarters empty. The brown earthenware bowl in the centre of the foreground has water for use in the pressing process.</p> <p>Note 1: <i>L'Assommoir</i> is the seventh novel in Émile Zola's twenty-volume series <i>Les Rougon-Macquart</i>. Usually considered one of Zola's masterpieces, the novel is a study of alcoholism and poverty in the working-class districts of Paris. The title refers to a shop selling cheap liquor distilled on the premises.</p>	<p>The woman on the right presses down on an iron – literally a tool made of iron. The iron has been heated by the stove behind. She presses down on a white garment or sheet, almost drawn by Degas with grey shadows on white lead.</p> <p>Reversing the picture so that the diagonal made by the work bench edge begins in the right hand corner and proceeds to the left hand edge of the picture quickens the visual pace. The dynamic activity of the woman pressing down on the iron in the actual picture provides enough diagonal strength to her activity and allows the emphasis on the tiredness of her colleague.</p> <p>The choice of this subject echoes the naturalist and social concerns of some of the artist's contemporaries, in literature as well as in painting. Émile Zola's novel <i>L'Assommoir</i> (note 1) published in 1877 describes Gervaise's laundry and gives a bald description of the miserable lot of the poor in Paris. Depicted hard at work, weary to the bone, the two women in Degas's painting illustrate a lucid view of the working class but one not devoid of tenderness.</p>