

listing artists and people portrayed (mainly monarchs) and an extensive and up-to-date bibliography. Impeccable scholarship, much new information and luxurious illustrations help the reader to see ivory in a new way as a vehicle for supremely skilled carving and as a reflection of the beliefs, tastes and culture of a vanished world.

1 K.A. Möller and K. von Berswordt-Wallrabe, eds: *Elfenbein: Kunstwerke des Barock*, Schwerin 2000; P. Malgouyres: *Ivoires de la Renaissance et des Temps Modernes: La Collection du Musée du Louvre*, Paris 2010; E.D. Schmidt: *Das Elfenbein der Medici: Bildhauerarbeiten für den Florentiner Hof*, Munich 2012, reviewed by Marjorie Trusted in this Magazine, 155 (2013), pp.182–83; M. Trusted: *Baroque and Later Ivories*, London 2013, reviewed by Pierre Ickowicz in this Magazine, 156 (2014), pp.761–62; J. Kappel: *Elfenbeinkunst im Grünen Gewölbe zu Dresden. Geschichte einer Sammlung: Wissenschaftlicher Bestandskatalog – Statuetten, Figurengruppen, Reliefs, Gefäße, Varia*, Dresden 2017, reviewed by Jørgen Hein in this Magazine, 161 (2019), pp.258–59; and J. Hein, *Ivories and Narwhal Tusks at Rosenborg Castle: Catalogue of Carved and Turned Ivories and Narwhal Tusks in the Royal Danish Collection 1600–1875*, Copenhagen 2018, reviewed by Jeremy Warren in this Magazine, 162 (2020), pp.546–47. A catalogue of the extensive collection in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, is in preparation by Jens Ludwig Burk.

2 The main geographical exceptions are sculptures from Goa (cat. no.34) and China (no.59).

### The Letters of Edgar Degas

*Edited and annotated by Theodore Reff.  
3 vols, 1,464 pp. incl. 55 col. ills. (Wildenstein  
Plattner Institute, New York, 2020),  
£158.95. ISBN 978-0-9988175-1-4.*

by RICHARD THOMSON

Without doubt, Edgar Degas was one of the greatest artists of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century French art, as well as one of its fascinating personalities. Theodore Reff's contribution has been fundamental to our understanding of this extraordinary figure for over half a century, twin summits being his scrupulous publication of Degas's notebooks in 1976 and his supplement to P.-A. Lemoisne's catalogue raisonné in 1984.<sup>1</sup> Reff first drew attention to unpublished Degas letters in the late 1960s, so the appearance of this mighty three-volume edition of the artist's correspondence is the culmination of a long-standing commitment, the third peak in the range of his scholarship on the artist.

This massive project was necessarily of long gestation. The previous edition of the artist's letters, published by Marcel Guérin in 1945, included 251, to which another seven written to James Tissot were added to the English translation in 1947.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent decades newly discovered letters have

been published by such scholars as Jean Adhémar, Denys Sutton, Henri Loyrette, Michael Pantazzi and Caroline Durand-Ruel Godfroy. With Reff's assiduous decades of work, tracing letters in archives, private collections and on the market, we are now presented with 1,251 letters, a quarter of which are unpublished, and a much deeper and richer Degas is revealed to us. The three volumes are practical and usable. Reff's authoritative seventy-five-page introduction takes the reader through the main themes of the correspondence and many of the insights that can be drawn from it. The letters are fully annotated, indeed with scrupulous attention to detail, such as the text Degas's old friend Evariste de Valernes asked to have carved on his gravestone. Undated and minor notes, such as replies to dinner invitations (Degas scorned the telephone), are prudently clustered at the end. The third volume has not only the bibliography and indices but also potted biographies of Degas's main correspondents, and these, as well as the introduction, include images that show individuals and set the period tone. The original letters and their annotations are printed in the first two volumes, with the English translations and apparatus in the third.

What emerges from the correspondence? Degas does not seem to have kept post sent to him, probably lost in his many moves. There are very few letters from his early years, for example to his father while he studied in Italy in 1856–58. None survive to colleagues to whom he surely wrote, such as Edouard Manet, Mary Cassatt and Edmond Durany. Indeed, the largest number of letters to an individual are not to a close friend such as Henri Rouart or Albert Bartholomé, but to the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, Degas's *de facto* banker. After the mid-1890s – Degas was sixty in 1894 – the letters become thinner, probably due to his worsening eyesight, and there are few of substance after he turned seventy. Thus, the main span of the correspondence is the three-and-a-half decades after 1870. Such surprises and imbalances do not detract from the fascinating picture of Degas that the letters expose.

As Reff's introduction points out, Degas was well-educated – his eight years of Latin at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, Paris, allowed him to quote Virgil's *Georgics* on plane-trees while at Carcassonne in 1890 (Letter 394). He was also well-read and inventive with his own writing, sending lines of poetry to José-Maria Heredia (Letter 342) and often

writing letters to Georges Jeanniot and his wife in a casual blank verse. Degas's well-known anti-Semitism rears its ugly head in his correspondence, and we learn more of his friendship with the arch-conservative journalist Maurice Talmeyr. That said, Degas penned a very kind letter to Walter Sickert when his father died in 1885 (Letter 270) and, realising that he had inadvertently been rude to her, asked Alfred Stevens to smooth relations with his fellow Belgian painter Alix d'Anethan (Letter 1216), with whom he then had an extended friendship. The observant humour that one finds in Degas's painting, in which figures scratch and yawn, recurs in his waspish letters about spa society at Cauterets. For Degas was well accustomed to the railway network, travelling a good deal to visit family, friends and health resorts. As Reff observes, the letters reveal him to be little interested in historic monuments but, despite a propensity to gastric disorders, much interested in food. They also witness a wider range of social connection that we often think. By the 1890s Degas was meeting such social luminaries as the Princesse de Polignac and the Comtesse de Béhague. When he accepted the latter's invitation to dinner in 1901 (Letter 867), did she invite him despite his widely circulated barb about Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret's *Last Supper* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Arras), which she owned, or perhaps because of it? Certainly, Degas had a memorably wicked way with words, resenting the good weather at Étretat in 1882 'more Monet than my eyes can bear' (Letter 182) or in 1900 complaining that 'the artists have invaded the Creuse. There were already vipers' (Letter 859).

Reff rightly points out that the letters reform views inherited from memoirs of Degas – and, one might add, others commonplace in art history – that distort the record. A quarter of Degas's letters were to women, with whom he had many close and lively friendships. They reveal an affair with the dancer Alice Biot in 1885 (Letter 258) and Reff establishes that in the mid-1890s Degas courted three bourgeois women notably younger than him with a view to marriage. So much for the discredited charges of misogyny or sexual inadequacy. But evidently Degas, who frequently complained about loneliness in his letters, sought companionship, and Reff notes that as Degas neared fifty his correspondence reveals regret at being single. This coincided with anxieties about the way his work was going – 'De la Croix has the name of a painter' (Letter 188) – and gives scope for speculation about the interplay

between Degas's psychological and physical condition and his creative work. The letters offer little in the way of ideas about art or Degas's specific ambitions; what there is about his practice concerns technique and practicalities. But they also reveal his collaborative professionalism: in 1870 writing to the Paris press about reform of the Salon (Letter 19 and 20), in 1874 helping set up the exhibition of independent artists and in 1879 pushing *Le Jour et la Nuit*, the collective etching project. Importantly, the letters show that we need to take a wider view of Degas's attitudes to artists and by implication what he thought was significant work. During the 1870s he wrote of naturalism rather than Impressionism, wanting to include Jules Dalou and Jean-Charles Cazin in the group exhibitions; in 1882 he encouraged Jean-François Raffaelli to join the exhibitions of the Société Nationale alongside the likes of Cazin and Jean Béraud (Letter 186) and in 1893 delayed leaving Paris because of the opening of the Champ-de-Mars Salon (Letter 537). Degas was an artist whose allegiances were broad but who remained independent, whose creativity was relentless but increasingly private, whose sociability was disrupted by his own inconsistent behaviour: a fascinating life revealed by Theodore Reff's magisterial edition of his letters.

1 T. Reff: *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas: A Catalogue of the Thirty-Eight Notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale and other Collections*, Oxford 1976; and P. Brane and T. Reff with A. Reff: *Degas et son œuvre: a supplement*. New York 1984.

2 M. Guérin, ed.: *Lettres de Degas*. Paris 1945; and *idem*, ed.: *Degas: Letters*, transl. M. Kay, Oxford 1947.

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**The Man Who Invented Aztec Crystal Skulls: The Adventures of Eugène Boban**  
By Jane MacLaren Walsh and Brett Topping.  
348 pp. incl. 81 b. & w. ills. (Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2020), £15.95.  
ISBN 978-1-789-20478-0.

by MICHAEL HALL

When Jane MacLaren Walsh, then primary researcher in pre-Columbian Mexican archaeology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington, was asked to contribute a chapter to a book about problematic objects in the museum's Department of Anthropology her mind turned to a large skull carved from rock crystal. Locked in a cabinet in her office awaiting further investigation, it had been given to the museum some years before.

According to the anonymous donor, it was acquired in Mexico in 1960 and was of Aztec origin. Walsh's chapter in the book, published in 1997, proved to be the start of a fifteen-year research project that has resulted in the book under review, written in collaboration with her editor, Brett Topping, which is both an intriguing detective story and a richly detailed account of the study, collecting and faking of pre-Columbian antiquities in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Nobody was greatly surprised that the skull proved not to be Aztec, or even old. It was stylistically anomalous, and it had been known since the 1950s that a much smaller rock-crystal skull formerly in the museum's collection was made with modern lapidary tools. That raised the question of the authenticity of two well-known rock-crystal skulls, one in the British Museum, London (Fig.7), also life-size, and a smaller one in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, both believed to be Aztec. Walsh arranged for the Smithsonian skull to be brought to London for comparison with that in the British Museum. Examination by two specialists in prehistoric stone carving, Elizabeth Carmichael and Margaret Sax, revealed that the London skull was also modern, a fact confirmed by comparison with the very different techniques used for carving the sole large-scale rock-crystal Aztec object with an unimpeachable archaeological provenance, a goblet excavated in Oaxaca and now in the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Walsh's curiosity about the skulls was further piqued by her discovery that the London and Paris skulls and the smaller Smithsonian one shared a provenance in the French collector and dealer Eugène Boban (1834–1908). At this point the book develops into a full-scale biography of this remarkable man, who, fortunately for Walsh, left a large but hitherto little investigated archive, divided between the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, and the Hispanic Society of America, New York. Boban came from a family (possibly of Croatian origin) who had been tailors in Angers. His father, René, moved to Paris, where he worked as a *gainier*, a craftsman in leather goods. In 1853 father and son left for the Californian gold fields. Although they did not make their fortunes, Eugène's career was shaped by his experiences on the West Coast of America, where he learnt Spanish and became interested in native artefacts. By 1857 he had fetched up in Mexico City. It was a boom period for pre-Columbian archaeology,

inspired by the discoveries made during the construction of the city in the early nineteenth century, which had led to the foundation of the country's Museo Nacional de Historia in 1825. European museums were also taking an interest: the Musée du Louvre, Paris, acquired its first major collection of Mexican antiquities in 1849.

Boban was well placed to exploit this new enthusiasm and he rapidly formed a large collection, intended in part for sale in a shop he set up in Mexico City. His clients included Emperor Maximilian, and items from Boban's shop found their way to the ill-fated emperor's castle, Miramare, near Trieste. Boban did not rely only on the market for making acquisitions but used Mexico's developing railway network to visit the major sites at Chalco, Azcapotzalco and Texcoco, where he carried out his own excavations, an endeavour helped by his learning Nahuatl, the Aztec language.

In 1867 Boban exhibited a large collection of Mexican objects at the Exposition Universelle in Paris as a preliminary to an attempt to sell it *en bloc*, for which he returned to France in 1869. However, the Louvre turned it down as too expensive and instead Boban opened a shop in the rue du Sommerard in the fifth arrondissement, dealing in natural history specimens (including human remains, such as mummies) as well as pre-Columbian and other ethnographic artefacts. He published academic articles on Mexican antiquities and developed a network of friendships with museum curators and collectors. These endeavours paid off in 1875, when he sold 2,025 items from his collection to the celebrated ethnologist Alphonse Pinart.

Now mostly in the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, the acquisition was recorded in a catalogue written by Boban that is forensically examined by Walsh. The first item was an Aztec manuscript calendar wheel that Boban believed was pre-Columbian. Although now thought to have been made c.1530, there is no doubt that the manuscript, which since 1950 has been owned by Brown University, Providence, is a work of exceptional rarity and it is a tribute to Boban's knowledge that he understood its importance. The third item in the catalogue, however, is a demonstration of how he manipulated scholarship to his own ends. Boban claimed that this carved obsidian plaque was dated 1327 and suggested that it commemorated a major historical event, leaving the reader to make a connection