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A MERE TWO MILLIMETERS AWAY FROM THE CANVAS

Painting 1
Title: "Rough Sea"
Artist: Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael
Country: Netherlands
Date: Around 1670
Dimensions: ~42 in. x ~49 in.
Institution: Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Painting 2
Title: "Racehorses at Longchamp"
Artist: Edgar Degas
Country: France
Date(s): 1871, possibly reworked in 1874
Dimensions: ~13 in. x ~16 in.
Institution: Museum of Fine Arts Boston

A Mere Two Millimeters Away from the Canvas

A lot can be learned, by looking at paintings online or at a distance, but examining paintings up-close, in-person, allows the viewer of artwork to get a special 'view' into the inner workings of the painter's style and mind. Two landscape paintings from the MFA: "Rough Sea" from around "1670" (**Painting 1, pg. 11**); and "Racehorses at Longchamp" from the 1870s (**Painting 2, pg. 12**); are prime examples of paintings that spill their secrets when they are closely analyzed from just two millimeters away.[1]

Painting 1: "Rough Sea", Section 1

"Rough Sea", by the Dutch painter, Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael, was the first painting analyzed. Before examining the minute details of the painting, a lot of information can be deduced by simply looking at the painting from a distance. The painting is grandiose, as its dimensions are ~42 inches by ~49 inches.[2] It is evident that the technique used was oil painting, because of the soft edges and desaturated/washed-out colors (acrylic paints on the other hand often have crisp edges and vivid colors). A storm at sea that is ravaging several ships, is the main subject of the painting (**Painting 1, pg. 11**). The ships are the secondary subject. What immediately arrests the attention of viewer, is the arrangement of forms within the piece of art.

The composition of the painting is broken up into horizontal thirds. While the ships appear to be the focal point, in the foreground of the painting (in the middle third), they are ultimately deemphasized, due to their placement in the environment (**Painting 1, pg. 11**). The minuscule city in the background is also deemphasized. The dramatic sky takes up nearly two thirds (the top third and a lot of the middle third) of the painting, thereby dwarfing the ships

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[1] Rough Sea MFA Collection Description (Museum of Fine Arts Boston).; Racehorses at Longchamp MFA Collection Description (Museum of Fine Arts Boston).
[2] Rough Sea MFA Collection Description.

(**Painting 1, pg. 11**). The violent sea takes up the bottom third of the painting. Ruisdael's choice

to make the ships the focal point, while making them appear inferior to the looming

environment, creates suspense that captures the attention of viewers. His choice also conveys the

main subject, the storm (which is far more complex than just showing ships) (**Painting 1, pg.

11**). The tiny Dutch city in the background of the painting adds to the tension as the it looks

probable that the ships might not make it make to the far-off shore. The choice to make the

cloudy sky prominent, reflects the ideals of the wealthy Dutch who believed that God had given

them good fortune (with the great shipping business in the Netherlands).[3] The sky is a regularly

used motif in Dutch paintings that directly references the 'heavenly sky' and is a visual metaphor

for the good fortune God gave to the Dutch society. Like in other Ruisdael paintings, nature is

emphasized in this landscape—as it overwhelms the ships and humans.[4]

<div align="center">Painting 1: "Rough Sea", Section 2</div>

Continuing to look this painting from a faraway distance, will allow most viewers to see

Ruisdael's choice of colors and his means of showing three dimensions. For the most part

Ruisdael choice, a cool color palette, creating a painting that consists of many hues of blue. The

sky is a robin-egg blue, while the sea is a deep, navy blue to convey the drama between the

alleviating sky and the treacherous waters. Ruisdael chooses to keep the tone of the painting dark

and moody, with his choice to use warm colors sparingly (red appears on the flags of the ships, a

golden yellow glow surrounds some of the ships, while light pink and yellow appear in the

clouds) (**Painting 1, pg. 11**) (**Image A, pg. 13, #3**). The positioning and size of the elements of

the painting indicate that painting uses linear perspective to convey three dimensions. For

instance, the ships and in the foreground seem close to the viewer (because they are enlarged),

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[3] "Baroque Painting" (Essential Humanities).
[4] "Jacob van Ruisdael Style and Technique" (Artble).

while the city in the background seems further away from the viewer (the buildings appear like little specks on the horizon). The cloudy sky also uses linear perspective, with the closer clouds magnified, while the further away clouds taper/recede into the horizon. Further information can be discovered about the painting by looking at the painting very closely.

<div align="center">Painting 1: "Rough Sea", Section 3</div>

The paint applied to canvas must have been dry, because paint on the surface is showing signs of cracking. The paint appears to have applied thickly and smoothly on most of painting, as the underpainting is not visible; all mistakes have been covered up; very little of the canvas is showing. In regards to smoothness, the painting is devoid of obvious lumpiness or protrusion of the paint on the canvas. The brush strokes are small and smooth throughout the whole piece, allowing Ruisdael to painfully capture the tiny details in the clouds, sky, sea, and ships (**Painting 1, pg. 11**). This makes the painting appear fine-tuned and realistic. All the details and the sheen of paint indicate that a soft, thin brush was used for the entirety of the painting. As previously mentioned, the painting was attempting to achieve realism, so it makes that Ruisdael would use a soft, thin brush to capture all the details. Ruisdael use a variety of hand motions to apply the paint.

The hand motion used to apply the paint was a circular one for the clouds, where the texture of the paint seems swirly (**Image A, pg. 13, #1**). For the most part the effect is very soft looking and there is a chalkiness to the clouds. The low-lying clouds near the ships have some transparency to them, allowing the viewer to see the ship underneath them, giving the effect that the clouds are less dense, and that ships can pass through them (**Image A, pg. 13, #5**). A different hand motion, used to create the waves—it is a fast and upward diagonal motion (to the right) (**Image A, pg. 13, #2**). This makes the waves look like they are lifting up with a massive

force and are moving with incredible speed. While the ships were painted with a tiny brush, that does not hide the hand motion used. A slow/methodical combination of vertical and diagonal brush strokes were used to recreate the sails, the body of the ships, and the masts. Like the clouds, the waves have a chalky look to them. The hand motions and texture of the paint amounts to a painting that appears lively and suspenseful. Looking at the subtle layers of paint reveals more about the intentions of Ruisdael.

For the most part Ruisdael hides his underlying process, covering up any sketch lines and changes with layers of paint. The way the paint is layered shows that Ruisdael started with the cloudy sky, then to the rough sea, and finally to the ships and extraneous details (most likely the placement of the ships was figured out in an underpainting). It is also common practice to paint areas with light paint before adding darker paints and the details (closer to the end of the painting process). On several occasions the layers of paint seem extra thin, allowing the viewer to see the weave of the canvas. The sea shows the canvas, and the texture adds to the visual movement, and heightens the sense of storminess. Ruisdael shows highlights in multiple ways. On the on the sails of ship he uses bands of light colors (and even white) to create the highlight effect (**Image A, pg. 13, #6**). The sea has a lot of highlights, which indicate the various whitecaps and violence of the waves crashing into the ships (**Image A, pg. 13, #2**). Ruisdael's style in this painting is distinctive (and carries into his other paintings), as they are composed of minuscule brush strokes, which give the paintings a refined and realistic appearance.

Painting 2: "Racehorses at Longchamp", Section 1

"Racehorses at Longchamp", by the French painter, Edgar Degas, was the second painting analyzed. Before delving into the investigation of the microscopic details of Degas' piece, the viewer figures out a lot about the painting, from a distance. The painting is quite small,

as its dimensions are ~13 in. x ~16 in. inches .[5] The soft edges and muddied colors indicate that

the technique used was oil paints (**Image B, pg. 14, #2)**. Jockeys headed to a horse race are the

main subject of the painting (**Painting 2, pg. 12)**. The environment around the jockeys is the

secondary subject in the painting. Examining the composition informs the viewer the subjects of

the painting.

The composition of the painting is broken up into horizontal halves. The jockeys are

unmistakably the subject of the painting, as they are prominently featured in the center of the

foreground and are enlarged. Notably, Degas' choice to have depict many of the jockeys with

their back to the viewer. The town buildings, the hill, and the woods appear in the upper half of

the painting and are definitely secondary to the jockeys. Degas' choice enlarge the jockeys makes

it clear that they powerful and deserve the attention of the viewer. Arranging the jockeys so that

many face-away from the viewer, makes the painting feel like a quick snapshot, and invites to

the viewer to the jockeys in their 'journey' to the racetrack (**Painting 2, pg. 12)**.[6] The town

houses and the sky are simple additions that help add realism to the painting. The woods and

plains surround the jockeys in a blurry/dreamy haze, and serve to frame the jockeys—as the

greens enhance the other colors (**Image B, pg. 14, #2) (Image B, pg. 14, #6)**. Humans are

emphasized in this landscape, while the nature element is an aside.

Painting 2: "Racehorses at Longchamp", Section 2

The colors of the painting and the means of showing three dimensions can be observed,

without having to get ridiculously close to the painting. Degas uses a wide spectrum of

complementary warm and cool colors. Importantly, most of the colors appear to be desaturated,

with many of the paints appearing muddied—possibly dulled out by adding grays to the original

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[5] Racehorses at Longchamp MFA Collection Description.
[6] Denny, Walter (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst, November 25th, 2016).

paints. Degas achieves the three dimensional effect by using linear perspective. The jockeys are large compared to everything else around them and therefore appear in the foreground. The racetrack, hill, and town the jockeys are moving towards is correctly proportioned to the riders to create a convincing three dimensional effect (**Painting 2, pg. 12)**. With the exception of a few buildings, the buildings in the far—off distance appear as little smudges and dots. To get further information from the painting the viewer must move close to the painting to analyze the tiny details.

Painting 2: "Racehorses at Longchamp", Section 3

Degas' applied extremely wet paint to the canvas, because there is noticeable cracking all over the surface and a lot of the paint appears drippy/runny. The paint appears to have been applied thickly, because certain forms have been painted over. The brush strokes used, are bold and splashy. The jockeys, town buildings, and surrounding environment are made up of chunky blocks of color that indicate boldness (**Image B, pg. 14, #3)**. Streakiness can be seen in the field of grass, the hillside, the cloud, and the jockey outfits; where watered down paint mixed 'ran' together—creating splotchy, murky patches of grey and browns. Degas used a soft, thick brush for the entirety of the painting.[7] There are no hard edges or streaks, showing that Degas didn't use a stiff brush, and there are large sections of solid colors, that would normally be created with a thick brush. Getting close to the painting gives the viewer the opportunity to see Degas' hand motions.

Degas used a horizontal stroke (to the right) to create the cloudy sky—as the layered paint appears to favoring the right side. The texture of the paint appears smooth on the clouds. This choice makes the cloud feel genuinely airy (**Image B, pg. 14, #1)**. Degas then used a

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[7] Denny, Walter (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst, November 25th, 2016).

smooth vertical stoke to create the simple/geometric buildings and the 'flat' field of grass and hillside. The texture accompanying the vertical stroke, is 'dragged' and liquidity. The colors are 'pulled down' so they intersect, and combine with each other. The watered down paint can be seen throughout the painting and allows Degas to reveal the canvas and add interest to the grass. The watered down paint also exposes a couple areas that Degas tried to cover up. Degas revised the areas to get the proportions correct on the horse and make the sash a 'better fit' on the jockey (**Image B, pg. 14, #4**) (**Image B, pg. 14, #5**). Degas used a curving sweep of the brush to form the jockeys and the horses, as indicated by the highlights. This curving sweep results in 'dragged' texture that once again blends colors together, but the painting is more thickly applied, thereby creating a lumpy/raised texture. Degas' hand movements and resulting textures create a painting that is calm, plodding, and relaxed. Looking at the way the brushstrokes run and the use of color, one can assume that the sky was painted first, then by the field, then the hill, then the houses, and finally the jockeys. It would make sense that Degas would want to do the light colors first and progress to the dark colors. Degas would add the jockeys and horse at the very end (they would have been placed already in an underpainting). Degas uses a copper yellow to show the highlights on the jockey outfits, the horses, the field, and the hill. Using large swaths of color gives the painting a graphic quality and showcase Degas artistic "handwriting" (**Painting 2, pg. 12**). These chunky geometric areas of colors are inherent and can be seen in other works by Degas.

<div align="center">Comparing and Contrasting the Landscapes</div>

In "Rough Sea" the paint is smooth, with a clear delineation between the different forms/elements in the painting (**Painting 1, pg. 11**). No mistakes appear to be covered up as well. These artistic choices make the painting feel regal and professional. On the hand, the

"Racehorses at Longchamp" has paint is streaky—as the watered-down paint is combined to create new colors. Changes to the layout of work are not hidden/obscured by paint (**Painting 2, pg. 12**). These artistic choices make the painting appear offhand and spur-of-the-moment. The diagonal strokes in "Rough Sea" are organized chaos and create a strong sense of movement. "Racehorses at Longchamp" utilizes gentle, curved strokes that make the piece feel calm. In both cases the artists used circular motions to create clouds that are billowing, fluffy, and rosy. Analyzing Ruisdael's painting and Degas' painting exposed the many similarities and differences between the aforementioned artists.

<div align="center">The Final Brush Strokes</div>

The two artists and their landscapes, portrayed the clouds, buildings, and highlights similarly. However, that is where the similarities end. The artists have different views: on emphasizing humans versus nature; which textures should appear on the surface, which paintbrush should be used; and which colors should be used. The paintings served to show how different two landscape painters could be—with just two hundred years between them. Examining the landscape paintings and the painterly technique of Ruisdael and Degas, from two millimeters away, will have a lasting impact on how paintings are viewed and synthesized.

Appendix

Painting 1, pg. 11: Unedited photo of Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael's "Rough Sea"

Painting 2, pg. 12: Unedited photo of Edgar Degas' "Racehorses at Longchamp"

Image A, pg. 13: Annotated photo of Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael's "Rough Sea"

Image B, pg. 14: Annotated photo of Edgar Degas' "Racehorses at Longchamp"

Painting 1: "Rough Sea" by Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael[8]

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[8] *Rough Sea*, Ruisdael, About 1670, (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA).
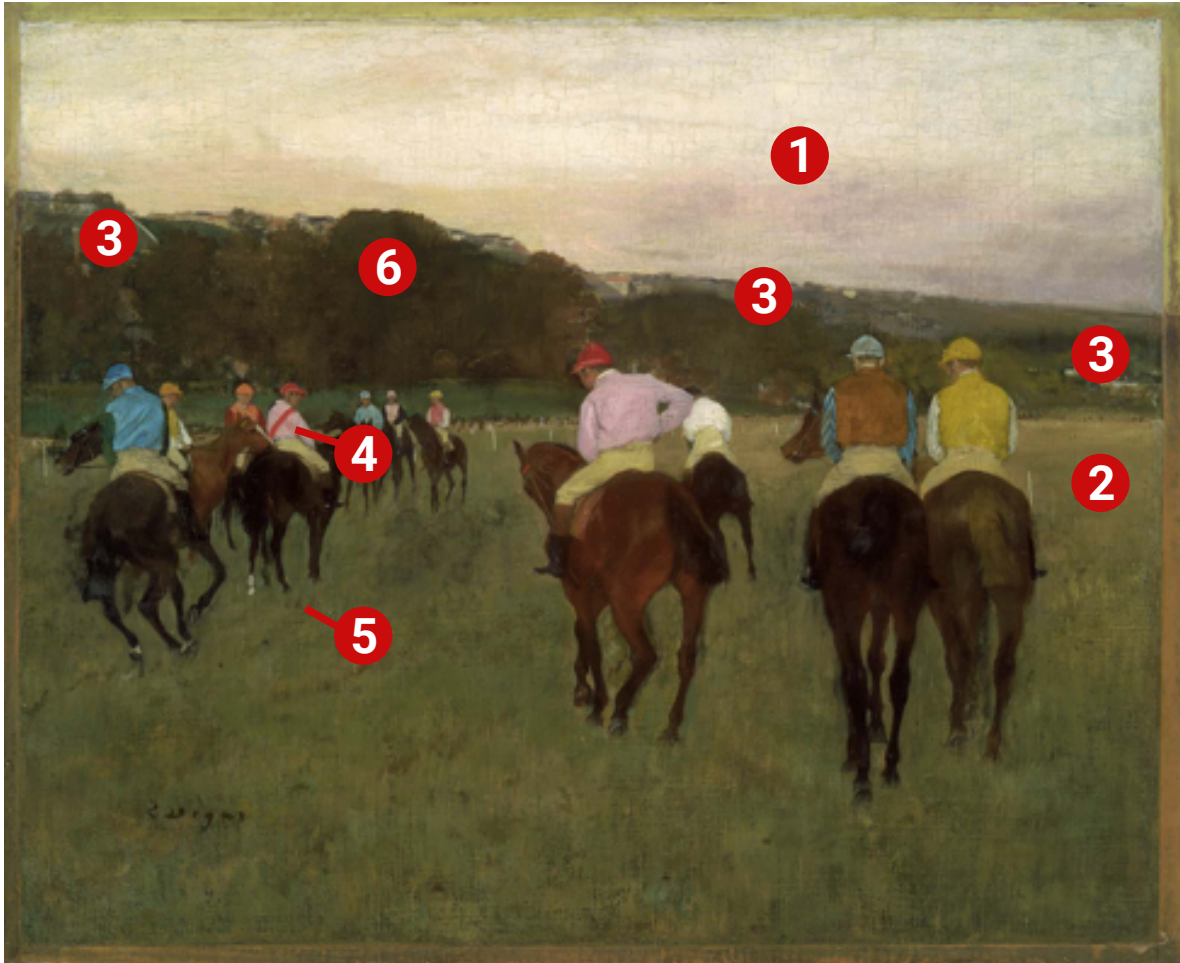
Painting 2: "Racehorses at Longchamp" by Edgar Degas[9]

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[9] *Racehorses at Longchamp*, Degas, 1870s, (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA).

Image A: Annotated version of "Rough Sea"[10]

#1: Cloud with circular brush stroke

#2: Dangerous sea showing diagonal brush stroke

#3: Highlight around ship

#4: Tiny city

#5: Transparent cloud

#6: Highlight on ship sail

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[10] *Rough Sea*, Ruisdael, About 1670, (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA). Edited

Image B: Annotated version of "Racehorses at Longchamp"[11]

#1: Clouds showing brush stroke

#2: Grassy plain showing extremely watered down paint merging/mixing

#3: Town and surrounding hillside

#4: Jockey with altered sash

#5: Horse with altered legs

#6: Woods

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11 *Racehorses at Longchamp*, Degas, 1870s, (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA). Edited

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