Honore Fragonard and his young sister-in-law, Marguerite Gerard, shared in making this family "snapshot" of his son, her nephew, two-year-old Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard. "Fanfan" (a French term of endearment for children) is caught scurrying by, clutching his toy dolls and hotly pursued by two little dogs. Vibrating with the lively touch of the rococo master, this is one of a group of prints by and after Fragonard newly acquired by the Department of Prints and Photographs. They were originally part of the personal collection of Mlle Gerard, Fragonard's pupil and, in this case, his collaborator.

Colta Ives
Illustrated on the cover of this Bulletin is a splendid gift received by the European Paintings Department in 1971, The Dance Lesson by Edgar Degas. The picture once belonged to Mr. and Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, whose treasures have long enriched many areas of the Metropolitan’s collections.

The family’s association with this institution goes back to 1888, when Henry Osborne Havemeyer, then head of the American Sugar Refining Company, became one of the fledgling Museum’s principal benefactors. Encouraged by his wife Louisine, an avid connoisseur of the arts, Havemeyer had amassed by the time of his death in 1907 one of the greatest private collections of old and contemporary masterworks, which Mrs. Havemeyer continued to augment until her death in 1929, the year of the family’s major bequest to the Metropolitan. It was through her friendship with Mary Cassatt, the American expatriate painter, that Mrs. Havemeyer first came in contact with the impressionist painters in Paris, among them Degas, whose works particularly enchanted her. Under the guidance of Miss Cassatt, the Havemeyer’s assembled the impressionist works — in their day considered boldly avant-garde — that eventually made the Metropolitan’s collection of paintings of this period one of the finest in the world. Prior to the 1929 bequest, Degas was weakly represented at the Museum; today, thirty-two of the forty Degas in the European Paintings Department are Havemeyer gifts.

The Dance Lesson is dated around 1879, the year of the fourth impressionist exhibition in Paris, and it is quite possible that the picture appeared in that show. Done in pastel, it is a relatively mature work of Degas, who by then was forty-five years old, but it is among the earliest devoted to the theme of the ballet, which fascinated him for the rest of his life. A man of some means, Degas was immersed in la vie parisienne: the theater, opera, concerts, the race track, the cafés, and, of course, the ballet. Perhaps even more than the performances, he loved the bustling behind-the-scenes activity and often went backstage to make studies such as our Dance Lesson. Here Degas has portrayed at the barre a ballerina — sparkling in her white tutu and sash, head crowned with a little red bow — practicing her grands battements en avant. She is accompanied by a violinist, an important figure in dance classes who often instructed the dancers as he played. While the work itself is of supreme delicacy, the girl’s face is anything but delicate, quite sulky and unattractive.

The significance of the picture lies in its highly calculated and sophisticated composition and in the fact that it is one of Degas’s first works in pastel. The composition consists of strong, sloping horizontals: the wall, the barre, the outstretched leg, the floor planks, and even the part in the violinist’s thinning hair. Although Degas has not indicated any sense of the room’s perspective, the figures are related to one another spatially by this linear pattern. This method of distorting space by transforming it into flat, asymmetrical patterns is a result of the art of Japanese printmaking and the experiments in photography that preoccupied Degas and his impressionist colleagues. Also interesting in the composition of this picture are the two lines — one running across the top and the other down the right side — that appear to be creases. Here is an example of a device Degas used quite often. After beginning a picture he sometimes wanted to enlarge it and did so by pasting strips of paper or by sewing additional canvas on to the original composition. The artist did several preparatory studies for The Dance Lesson: one of the violinist belongs to the Museum.

The Dance Lesson is done in carefully blended pastels of brown, black, white, and flesh tones, all uniformly applied over the paper surface. The sharpness and clarity of the picture confirm its date since later on, as the artist’s eyesight began to fail, his drawing became fuzzier and more abstract. The Italian Renaissance painters Degas so admired were the first to use the thin sticks of powdery color that eventually became the medium he preferred and that he felt gave him complete freedom to express subtle nuances of motion, color, and light.

It is understandable that Mrs. Havemeyer was taken by this charming picture and convinced her husband to buy it. Here Degas has remarkably combined techniques of past masters with his own innovative vision — an aspect of his style that once led Mrs. Havemeyer to say of him: “Has the soul of some Egyptian come to our western world? Whoever he is, he is modern to his fingertips and as ancient as the pyramids.”

26 1/2 x 23 1/16 inches. Anonymous gift, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 1971.185