

# Dancing on Paper – The Art of Edgar Jansen

Written By Lydia Rae Haworth

**Edgar Jansen** is a contemporary fine artist, currently living and working as a portrait painter in Amsterdam. Edgar first began his study of art at the State Academy of Fine Arts in Holland. He admires many artists from Classical painters such as Titian and Rembrandt, Romantics such as Delacroix, Impressionists such as Monet and Degas and Expressionists such as Schiele and Nolde to photographers such as Cartier Bresson. To some extent all the artists he admires have influenced him, but there is no specific artist whose example he has followed. Edgar has developed a personal and authentic style.

I first came across Edgar's work by complete coincidence through a general Internet search and immediately fell in love with the sheer beauty of his artwork. I e-mailed Edgar to discover more about his art and his history.

However, what interests me most is Edgar's more recent passion for capturing the movements of dance in his art. Edgar's drawings and paintings are so alive with energy that they appear to be almost dancing out of the paper, and each dance is instantly recognizable. I feel Edgar's wonderfully loose style of drawing and painting is particularly well suited to suggesting this sense of freedom and movement, as the long flowing lines create quite abstract images with a clear visual sense of flow. Edgar says, "I like dance as a visual experience, and also there was always some movement, dynamics in my work, so my style fits with this subject."

It is the subject of Edgar's work that particularly interests me and he tells me it has changed in the past 15 years. He says when he began drawing as a boy, his main subjects were landscapes, cityscapes, scenery and harbours, yet portraiture soon became his speciality. Edgar's portraits are in fact extremely life-like and it is as though he has captured that little sparkle from his muse's eyes and transferred it directly into the painting, as you sense the personalities of the subjects glowing from beneath the paint.

In the course of time, Edgar became more personally connected with dancers and his art became more embedded in the dance world. He is often invited by dancers to observe rehearsals and performances, and dancers often ask if they can use his art for flyers and posters.



I feel Edgar's incredible eye for catching movement is beautifully shown in the picture I will refer to as *Ballet One*. I particularly love the composition here as Edgar uses what appears to be large ink wash brush strokes up along the left side of the painting, which enhance the raising movement of the leg. I especially like how powerfully the upper body is thrusting backwards and how the leg is raised so high that it appears as though the dancer could be flying through the air.

Edgar's thoughts and description of his techniques are as follows; *"This was drawn at a ballet class with the dancer at the bar. I used a calligraphy pen, a Japanese brush pen and also a wet brush. To begin, I*

*made the shape with greyish washed ink and subsequently made the black lines with calligraphy pen and then the strong lines with Japanese brush pen. I felt the need to suggest the whole movement with the big brush stroke at the left.*”

Edgar says his art gradually became freer and looser the more experience he gained and the more connected he became with dance. It took him a number of years, he says, to develop his technique and when speaking of his beautifully distinctive style, he says, “I kind of developed my own style, a style that is a reflection of my personality.”

Edgar is a versatile artist using a vast array of media to create his artwork, ranging from more traditional graphite pencil, water colour, ink, pastel and oil paint to more unusual media such as Siberian chalk and also Sanguine chalk, which is an artist’s chalk manufactured from red earth pigment and is commonly used in Old Master drawings. For his dance drawings, Edgar likes to mix water colour, ink and chalk (mostly water soluble chalk) to achieve a wet-in-wet technique, where the flowing of the different colors of ink and water colour suggests an intense sense of movement.

In the last fifteen years recent developments in the art supply market have greatly influenced Edgar’s art. In today’s market, more and more water-soluble chalks are widely available, the most well-known being Caran d’Ache Neocolor. These chalks are extremely useful for Edgar’s art, as when the chalk comes into contact with water, it turns into paint.



The other recent advance in equipment is the Pentel Japanese brush pen. This brush pen is complete with a replaceable ink cartridge, similar to a fountain pen, which makes it very practical for Edgar to work with during performances.

However, as Edgar has told me, addition media is a rather precarious technique. Although it can yield fantastically fascinating outcomes, there is of course the risk that it can also fail completely. He tells me that “*the drawing can look different when it’s wet than when it has dried, which also depends on the quality of the paper*”.

This is true from the picture I refer to as *Flamenco One*, which Edgar describes as “*a flamenco dancer standing at the side, clapping her hands. It is drawn using brown ink, Japanese pen and red water colour. It is possible that there were some accidental reddish watercolor stains on the paper before I started the drawing. I like to use these 'accidents' and give room to coincidence. I first drew the lines of the dancer with the pen. You can see that in the upper part of the body, to give the body a strong shape and clear straight standing position, I used bigger stains consisting of ink with water.*”

But when I look at this piece of artwork, I would be none the wiser as to whether any accidents had taken place since the picture itself is simply delightful. I actually really like the reddish water colour stains as they suggest a possible swishing movement at the bottom of the dress, and also the stains around the hands suggest the movement and rhythm of the clapping of the hands. I also like the freedom of the lines around the face and in the hair as I think it is very well defined and creates an air of beauty. As image the dancer seems to be glowing



and radiant. The browns and red colours also appeal to me and create a real, warm sensuous flamenco feeling to the drawing.

Edgar also sometimes works on hand-made paper produced in Asia. This paper can be seen in the picture I refer to as *The African Dancer*. Edgar notes that *“This was drawn at the African dance class at a dance festival in France. It is drawn on natural handmade paper from Asia. I first drew the simple lines with a brownish grey chalk. Then I applied colour, using water colour. I felt the need to use bright colours, as the dancers were wearing colorful clothing and also to create an African feeling. African dance has a 'grounded' feeling with the heavy stumping movement of the legs to the rhythm of the drums. I tried to express that.”*

I feel particularly drawn to this picture, partially because of the bold, bright, energetic use of colours, which really bring this picture to life and even more so because this picture seems to convey a real sense of movement. I think Edgar has captured the ‘grounded’ African dance feeling superbly as the composition of the right arm seems almost as though it is pulling down the head, drawing it down and powerfully into the chest. This movement is also mirrored in the bent left leg, which adds to the very real African ‘grounded’ feeling. Edgar has most skilfully captured.

Edgar draws many different styles of dance. He tells me he began by drawing flamenco, and moved on from there, drawing ballet and subsequently modern dance and contact improvisation, tango, African and oriental dance such as Japanese buto and Balinese dance.



The picture I refer to as *The Indonesian Dancer* contrasts wonderfully with *The African Dancer* as the graceful hold in the arms and the lightness conveyed in the feet create an element of lightness and poise to the picture, as though the dancer is dancing daintily on the edge of her toes. I also love how the many soft pencil lines really suggest a sense of careful movement and grace.

Edgar drew this picture from a performance he watched at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. He tells me that *“At the time I did not have any experience drawing Asian dance. I later went to Bali in Indonesia and saw these kinds of dances with complicated movements of the hands. This drawing is made with different types of pencils such as soft, hard, fine, and large. With this technique I hardly lift my pencil from the paper at all. For my music drawings, I always use this technique for simply practical reasons, as in a concert hall you cannot take too much art material.”*

Edgar regularly attends concerts, performances and rehearsals to physically be in the presence of the dancers, and fully understand their movements before attempting to draw. Like a true impressionist, he prefers to be on location and work by direct observation, completing his artwork on the spot. This method of drawing makes his art look natural and spontaneous, not staged or posed. Edgar’s way of drawing dance is by sitting on the floor of a dance class with all his material surrounding him and his completed wet drawings laid out to dry. He draws numerous sketches at each session, and works incredibly quickly because he says if he works for too long, the movement disappears altogether from the drawing.

While attending the dance sessions, Edgar is not only influenced by what he sees, but also by what he hears. It is the music that influences him, whether it be the balletic sounds of the piano or the flamenco rhythms of the guitar, the heavy sounds of African drums or the music of the bandoneon behind a tango. They each have a different impact on his way of drawing.

Edgar produces around twenty sketches at each session and selects of his best works at home. He says that “sometimes almost everything is worth keeping – sometimes nothing is good at all.” However, he can also make minor corrections to some of his drawings after the session if he feels they can be improved.

Edgar tells me that in the picture I refer to as *Ballet 2*, he did in fact change the composition of the picture slightly to something more suited. Edgar says this picture was “*drawn at a ballet class in Amsterdam. It was drawn onto handmade paper from India, and drawn with blue water-soluble chalk and black ink. I first drew the shape of the moving body with blue chalk on wet paper, and a bit later – when I became sure about the dance position and the shape of the body – I made the strong black lines. You can see from the a blue line in the drawing that the lifted leg was first in another more upward position.*”



This picture is actually my favourite picture. I think I am primarily drawn to the colour blue as it is my favourite colour, but I also love the composition of the arms in what appears to be 4<sup>th</sup> position and the leg raised forward to mirror the arm positioning. I particularly like the bold black lines as they are really definite and clear, which makes the dancer seem bold and powerful. I also like how the lines seem to define the dancer’s ballet dress.

Edgar’s direct observation is clearly seen in his drawings, as he is not only able to capture the freedom of movement of the dancers, but is also able to express the character of the dance itself. I feel it is remarkable how Edgar manages to capture such movement, simply by watching alone, as he does not dance himself. Within a matter of minutes he has created something quite astounding, which I really admire.

Edgar’s quickly chooses a movement he sees and then draws that specific movement of the dancer from memory. So much so that he principally takes a mental photograph and uses his incredible visual memory to finish the drawing. Yet to capture the character and spirit of the movement, Edgar says, “*I mostly remember the essence of the dance, the other things I do from my imagination. I can change the image according to my taste, the colors and composition, so it is not an exact copy of reality.*” This is something I truly respect, as the freedom expressed is so rich that the pictures look like they are bursting with spontaneity, when actually Edgar knows exactly where he feels each line should go and how this will affect the overall movement of the picture.

I asked Edgar how he decides when he sees a movement that particularly appeals to him and how he decides what media and material to use. He says he simply chooses the movement that is most appealing, but cannot merely generalize which movements in particular. Edgar does mention that he often draws the dance when it is at its climax, for example a jump at its highest point.



This climax of the dance can be seen in the picture I refer to as *Ballet Jump*. This picture is actually a favourite of Edgar’s as he says you can really see the energy. He tells me, “*I drew this picture in a ballet class in France, where these jumps are always at the end of the ballet class. With a mixture of brown ink and chalk I tried to document this moment of high energy and excitement... I can feel the physical power and the sweat.*”

I admire this picture in much the same way as Edgar does. It emits a glorious sense of energy and freedom and your spirit is immediately lifted upon simply by looking at it. I feel the warm harmonious colours add to this uplifting effect with the warm, lively reds and oranges. I love the composition of this drawing, as the climax of the jump really emphasizes the captivating movement, as does the composition of the arms 'en couronne', intensifying the energy of the jump.

Edgar says that during the actual drawing process, he hardly comprehends what he is doing and simply follows his intuition as regards which material to use and the colours and style. He says, *"I see my drawing dance as an improvisation on paper. I see dance as a language of the body. I try to listen to that language and write it on paper."*

Edgar's artwork has been used for CD covers, magazines, posters and web sites, and his work is frequently exhibited in Holland and other countries throughout the world. He was also invited to give workshops at the international summer festivals of the famous dancer Frey Faust.

Edgar says that when he draws, he tries to imagine how the dancer feels during dance, *"the effort, energy and even pain make the movement and at the same time the feeling of freedom and excitement during the dance."* I believe this is why Edgar's art is mesmerising and a joy to look at. It is just so easy to become swept away by the movement each drawing portrays and it makes you simply want to get up and dance. It is no wonder he also passes on his knowledge and clear expertise in portraiture, and offers workshops in "drawing dance & movement". Edgar is a remarkable artist with a unique skill for capturing the movement of dance. As one of ballet's famous choreographers, George Balanchine once said, "dance is music made visible" – and Edgar's art most definitely sings.

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## Sources

*Information:*

**Edgar Jansen's official website**

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**Kind contributions from Edgar Jansen himself**

*Pictures:*

**All pictures were taken from [www.edgarportraits.com](http://www.edgarportraits.com)© and sent via email, courtesy of Edgar Jansen himself**

*With special thanks to Edgar for his cooperation and patience.*