



Woman Combing Her Hair (c. 1888–90) by Edgar Degas, with embroidery by Hagar Vardimon, 2018

AN INTIMATE GESTURE

THE STORY OF A WOMAN AND HER HAIR,
THROUGH THE EYES OF A MASTER.

Think of the motions you go through every day. The ones you've performed so many times that you do them without much thought. You know how to brush your teeth, how to sign your name, how to wash your hands. Edgar Degas liked to linger on those routine moments. "He has always had a preoccupation with the movements we do repeatedly—bathing, ironing clothes, ballerinas rehearsing a dance. It tends to be a scene that feels natural and intimate," says George Shackelford, deputy director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. For instance, a woman combing her hair after a bath. Her mind may be wandering while she sits in the nude, working through snags and tangles, but the tableau is a reminder that even if it comes as second nature, interacting with our hair is a private and intimate act. "It's a personal, domestic moment," Shackelford

says. Of course, in this case, it's hard to look past her long, thick mane. Something calls for you to reach out and touch it. For mixed-media artist Hagar Vardimon, who reimagined the piece with cotton stitching, it's the movement that caught her eye. "When I look at this work, I'm attracted to the way her hair flows. She's sitting still—busy with her daily routine—but the way Degas draws each stroke almost makes it feel like the air around her is moving. Our hair behaves a lot like thread—the weight and the movement—so I used it to enhance that feeling," Vardimon says. Her instincts are spot on. "Degas draws long, flowing lines that make up the individual strands of hair. You can almost mime his exact strokes—it's like he drew them in the direction she's combing. So the hair looks alive to us," Shackelford says. "It has real luminosity." —LOREN SAVINI

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