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Degas in 3D

BY [JONATHAN LEWIS](#)

There's something bewitching about the new exhibition at the Memorial Art Gallery. The Degas bronzes, which form the core of the show, are dazzlingly seductive in their beauty. But what lies beneath those gleaming surfaces?

The story begins at the end, when Degas died in 1917 after years of failing health and virtual blindness. The relatives and dealers descended, and Degas's vast collection of art --- including masterpieces by Delacroix, Ingres, Cezanne, Manet, Daumier, and Gauguin that he had intended to donate to the state --- was quickly liquidated in a series of auctions. But one question still remained: What to do with about 150 wax sculptures of dancers, bathers, and horses that lay in various states of decay around his studio and apartment?

After some legal wrangling it was finally decided that 73 of the best sculptures would be cast in bronze, each in an edition of 22. But the casting of these waxes ran contrary to Degas's wishes. He had often been quite adamant that his sculptures were merely "exercises to get me going" (in an interview with the journalist François Thiébauld-Sisson in 1897) --- in preparation for his painting and drawing. An exception to this was the wax of the *Little Dancer, Aged 14* --- the only sculpture Degas ever publicly exhibited.

Degas never cast any of his works in bronze, thinking it too permanent a medium. Ambroise Vollard's brief but personal biography of Degas, published in 1924, recounts the artist insisting that "it's too much responsibility... that stuff lasts for eternity!" But after Degas's death it was argued that casting his sculptures in this metal was the perfect way to preserve his delicate models for posterity. In 1918 Degas's dealer, Durand-Ruel, wrote, "the waxes are so dry that I am afraid, if they are not cast soon by an expert, they will crumble completely into worthless pieces."

If preservation really was the goal, was it necessary to make so many copies of each? Surely one or two would have sufficed. Strange too, that the waxes, which were in such imminent danger of collapse, still survive

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Balanced bronze: Degas's "Arabesque."

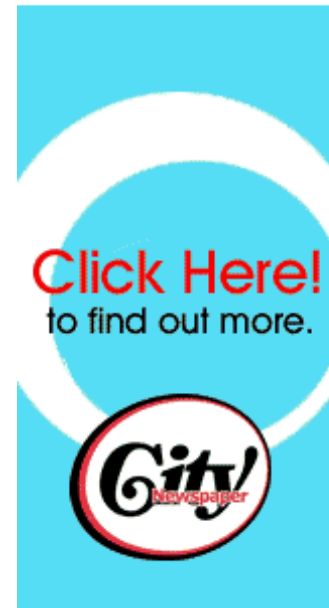
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to this day. The majority of them have recently gone on display in the new sculpture galleries at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Clearly a desire to cash in on the name of Degas played an important role in the creation of these bronzes, and for some people the hypocrisy rankles. But the patina of time has lent them increased respectability, and they have become more and more collected. The process, however, was slow. In its 1946 bulletin, the Metropolitan Museum of Art still regarded them with thinly disguised disdain: "The reproduction of these unfinished sketches in 20 sets of bronze... is rather too plainly a franc-stretching gesture on the part of the [artist's] heirs."

It's naïve to expect that art can ever be entirely divorced from commerce, nor is their relationship necessarily detrimental. You need only take a short stroll around the beautifully lit cases at the Memorial Art Gallery to realize that, whatever their origins, the bronzes radiate genius. They were cast by Albino Palazzolo, a master of his craft, at one of the best foundries in Paris. And Palazzolo was meticulous in his adherence to the original wax models. The respect with which the sculptures were made elevates them far above any gift-shop reproduction.

The star of the show is undoubtedly the *Little Dancer*, whose upright stance and proud impish features convey a powerful sense of youthful confidence. It's all the more poignant, then, to discover that the young ballet student who modeled for it did not succeed in her chosen field but, later, like many of her kind, fell into a life of prostitution. Other highlights include *Dancer Looking At The Sole Of Her Right Foot*, a brilliant example of Degas's preoccupation with realism, and a magnificent case of three elegantly balanced *Arabesques*.

To accompany the sculptures the gallery has put together an impressive display of Degas's works in other media --- pastels, sketches, prints, paintings. But the bronzes, as faithful records of those unfinished and unselfconscious waxes, give us the deepest insights into Degas's art. It is peculiar to contemplate that pieces fabricated after his death, without his authorization, in a medium in which he had never even experimented, could so successfully evoke the spirit of the man. But they do.

Edgar Degas: Figures in Motion continues through January 5 at the Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Avenue. Hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays, noon to 5 p.m.; Thursdays and Fridays noon to 9 p.m.; Saturdays 10 to 5 p.m.; Sundays noon to 5 p.m. Tickets: adults \$10 (weekends \$12); seniors and students \$9 (weekends \$11); children 6-16 \$6. Weekend prices apply on Fridays, too. 473-7720.

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