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Indepth Arts News:

"Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures"

2003-06-28 until 2003-09-28

[San Diego Museum of Art](#)

San Diego, CA, USA United States of America

At the end of this month, the San Diego Museum of Art will open an extremely rare opportunity to view all 73 bronze sculptures by the great French impressionist master, Edgar Degas, in a single exhibition. Titled Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures, the exhibition will be augmented by a selection of prints and drawings by Degas to provide visitors with a fuller view of the artist's creative genius for representing the figure in motion. Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures explores one of the most fascinating aspects of the work of French painter and sculptor Edgar Degas (1834–1917), whose innovative compositions, skillful drawing, and perceptive analysis of movement made him one of the late 19th-century masters of modern art.



The collection of 73 sculptures in the show is one of only four complete sets of Degas bronzes, which were cast shortly after the artist's death, in existence. They come from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil, and their presentation is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski, International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee.

"We are pleased to present such an extraordinary opportunity to explore Degas's complete work in sculpture. Degas's images of ballerinas, racehorses, and bathers reflect an unprecedented level of understanding of the figure in motion. A pioneering artist in so many respects, Degas set the stage for later developments in modern art through his innovations in the medium of sculpture," says the Museum's executive director, Don Bacigalupi, Ph.D. Featured among Degas's celebrated bathers, horses, and dancers in Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures will be one of the icons of 19th-century art: Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen. This masterpiece was the only sculpture Degas exhibited in his lifetime when he included it in the sixth exhibition of impressionist art in Paris in 1881. The groundbreaking mixed-media work was so roundly condemned by a number of prominent critics that Degas was discouraged from ever showing sculpture again. Many of his fellow impressionist artists, however, applauded him as the first modern sculptor.

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His close friend Mary Cassatt stated, "I believe he will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter," and Pierre-Auguste Renoir went so far as to proclaim Degas "the greatest living sculptor."



One of the most important figures of the French art world at the close of the 19th century, Degas was the eldest son of a wealthy Parisian banking family. The relative financial security he enjoyed throughout his career allowed him the freedom to experiment artistically without concern for selling his work. His early training with Ingres disciple Louis Lamothe and a brief stint at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts provided Degas with a thorough grounding in the classical tradition, with its emphasis on drawing and line, which stayed with Degas throughout his lifetime. A pivotal encounter with Edouard Manet during a visit to the Louvre in 1862 led to his introduction to a group of young artists meeting at the Café Guérbois, who would soon become known as the impressionists.

Though he preferred to consider himself a "realist" or "naturalist" rather than an "impressionist," Degas organized several of the impressionist group's exhibitions starting in 1874. Regardless of the medium in which he worked—painting, sculpture, pastel, drawing, etching, lithography, or monotype—Degas showed himself to be a keen observer of everyday scenes, capturing natural positions and breaking down movement in order to grasp its underlying rhythms. Typical of his fellow impressionists, he culled his subjects from the world of urban leisure: the racetrack, the ballet and opera, and the café-concert. Unlike the impressionists, however, Degas rarely painted en plein-air, preferring to work from memory and from sketches. Degas began to make small sculptures in wax in the late 1860s, the first of these coinciding with his growing fascination with representing scenes from the racetrack. The many wax sculptures of horses he created during this period functioned as three-dimensional sketches that he used to conceptualize the elaborate compositions of some of his paintings. These early sculptures were thus tools in Degas's explorations of the nature of movement, serving a similar purpose as the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, which Degas admired and studied. Degas's *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* of 1881 marked a radical turning point in the artist's approach to working in sculpture in a number of ways. It represented not only Degas's first ambitious attempt to create a fully realized work in sculpture for public exhibition, but it is one of his very first sculptures of the human figure, which had always been a central motif in his paintings.

Made of polychrome wax, a fabric bodice and tutu, and real hair tied in a satin bow, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* was technically and conceptually revolutionary for its time and unique in Degas's sculptural oeuvre for the number of preparatory studies that have been tied to it.

Degas's experiments in sculpture increased from the mid-

1880s—perhaps due in part to his failing eyesight—though from this point on it became a completely private undertaking for him. Shunning public exhibition of his work in wax and clay, he showed them only to the friends and colleagues who visited his studio.

Upon Degas's death, approximately 150 wax and modeling clay sculptures were found in his studio in various states of completion and repair. His heirs and colleagues recognized the importance of preserving these works for posterity and decided to cast in bronze the 73 best examples. These works demonstrate an unparalleled degree of experimentation, mixing of media, and use of advanced technology—including photography—and reveal Degas's innovative explorations of form and movement.

Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski, International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee, from the collections of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil. The local presentation of this exhibition is made possible in part by the generous support of CENTURY 21 Fine Homes and Estates, the James S. Copley Foundation, Northern Trust Bank, Hilton Gaslamp Quarter Hotel, the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, the County of San Diego Community Enhancement Program, the California Arts Council, and members of the San Diego Museum of Art.

Exhibition catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated, 288-page catalogue raisonné of Degas's sculptures, compiled by art historian and former museum director, Joseph S. Czestochowski, and conservateur général at the Musée d'Orsay, Anne Pingeot, who published the definitive catalogue of Degas's sculptures in 1991. In addition to a foreword by the late J. Carter Brown, the catalogue also features scholarly essays by noted Degas experts Ann Dumas, Charlie Millard, and Theodore Reff, with additional contributions by Daphne Barbour, Arthur Beale, Sara Campbell, Martine Kahane, Luiz Marques, and Shelley Sturman.

IMAGE:

Edgar Degas

Woman Rubbing Back (no. 28), modeled c. 1888-1892

Bronze

Collection Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil.

Courtesy International Arts, Memphis. (c) 2002.

Photo by Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini.

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