

For the week of July 3 - 9, 2003



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Art review - Bronze exhibit offers new perspective on Degas

BILL FARK
For the North County Times

Although French artist Edgar Degas was hailed as one of the most innovative and influential sculptors of the late 19th century, he publicly exhibited only one of his sculptural creations. The 73 pieces in the San Diego Museum of Art exhibition "Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures" were cast from wax models discovered in his studio after his death in 1917.

The 73 bronzes in the exhibition, one of four complete sets in existence, are from the collections of the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo,

Brazil. Joseph S. Czestochowski of International Arts in Memphis, Tenn., organized the show, which is coordinated locally by Steven Kern, the museum's curator of European art.

The exhibition, Kern said, "shows a whole new dimension of the artist." Degas used the waxes from which the bronzes were cast as "studies," Kern said. "They reveal his creative processes."

Although Degas never again put any of his wax sculptures on public display, he showed them to friends, and even cast three of them in plaster. Because of their impermanent nature, and Degas' habit of adding debris from his studio to the mix of wax and clay, several of his pieces deteriorated. Of the more than 150 he sculpted, 73 were salvageable and cast in bronze. The original casting was of 22 complete sets, 20 of which were for sale numbered A through T. (Most of the pieces in this exhibition are from the S set.)

"Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures"

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays-Sundays; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays; through Sept. 28

Where: San Diego Museum of Art, 1459 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego

Gary Arseneau, a Florida artist and gallery owner, has challenged the attribution of the bronzes to Degas. He calls them "fake," "counterfeit" and "inauthentic." He points out that Degas never worked in bronze and that the pieces were made from copies of plaster casts of Degas' wax sculptures.

Admission: \$8, general; \$6, seniors, young adults (18-24), students and military; \$3, children (6-17); children 5 and under free

Kern said that Arseneau's accusations are without merit.

Information: (619) 232-7931

"We do not claim that Degas had the sculptures cast, and to my knowledge, the bronzes have never been displayed with such a claim."

He said also that Arseneau's theories were those of 30 or 40 years ago.

"And some of his sources have been discredited. That he is a gallery owner himself makes me suspect his motives."

Kern offered reasons as to why Degas never cast his sculptures or displayed them.

"He was a perfectionist, who kept making changes to the wax pieces, just as he did to his paintings. Also, he was hurt by the critics' reaction to the one piece he did show, 'Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen.' "

They called her features "ugly" and "vulgar." Some suggested that the two-third life-sized figure dressed in a ballet slippers, linen bodice, muslin tutu and doll hair tied with a satin ribbon was better suited to Madame Tussaud's wax museum than to an art museum.

However the bronzes are classified, the exhibit is an opportunity to examine a relatively unrecognized aspect of a respected, well-known artist. During his lifetime, Degas worked in all forms of two-dimensional imagery, including photography. (He also wrote poetry. One of the gallery cards displays a translation of a Degas sonnet.)

The bronzes are definitely recognizable as his. This is easily ascertained from a selection of Degas paintings, drawings and prints on view throughout the exhibition. "The Ballerina," a painting from the Museum's holdings, depicts a dancer holding the same pose as the bronze "Dancer, Fourth Position Front, on Left Leg."

Another comparison is possible in the bronzes of horses. A page of sketches recently acquired by the Museum includes one for the painting "Fallen Jockey." Another of a horse and rider shows strong similarities to several bronzes in the exhibition, particularly

"Horse Galloping on Right Foot" and "Thoroughbred Horse Walking."

There are photos as well, some by Degas, of potential subjects. One set of a nude man running shows 14 images, half from the front and half from the rear. This collection is a detailed study that shows how various muscles interact, a great aid to the artist. In another set, of 20 images, a woman is shown front and back in various activities: walking, picking up a basket and handling a parasol.

Dance and dancers fascinated Degas; more than three-quarters of his paintings are devoted to dancers. Thus it follows that a large number of the bronzes (28) should feature dancers. The artist was not concerned with facial features, however. He concentrated on how the body moved, how the dancer shifted weight, how the movement of arms and legs affected other parts of the body. These studies are so carefully executed that the statues seem to have just completed a leap or an arabesque.

Several of the pieces are similar, showing slight changes in an arabesque, or preparing to leap. The dance bronzes also show that ballerinas were not always anorexic like their present-day counterparts. The dancers portrayed and those in the drawings and photos are full-figured with generous bosoms.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," also known as "Ballet Dancer, Dressed." The subject, Belgian-born Marie van Gothen, stands with her face impassive despite the strain of the awkward position, with her hands clasped behind her back. As in the miniature pieces, the posture suggests that the dancer has just moved into the position and is waiting for another command.

Another sculpture, "Study in the Nude for Dressed Dancer," is apparently a study for the completed piece. The figure is undeveloped, and the abdomen is thrust forward like that of "Little Dancer."

The bronzes show a great range of detail. Some are roughly executed, limbs seeming to be emerging from the metal. In a few cases, the castings show the print of Degas' fingers. Other pieces have smooth surfaces as though the artist had taken great pains to reproduce the body in question.

Horses, too, fascinated Degas; 17 of the pieces represent horses and jockeys. As with the dancers, Degas emphasized muscular relationships. Most of the subjects are shown while moving, from the sedate pace of walking to a strenuous gallop with a mounted jockey.

Other pieces show women in the bath, finishing a bath, arranging clothing and coiffures, and stretching. There is also a pregnant

woman, a woman seated bathing in a flat tub, and an unusual relief, "Picking Apples."

"Degas Sculptures," the catalog accompanying the exhibition, is one of the most informative art publications of recent memory. It includes eight essays covering all aspects of Degas' career, and an interview with the artist himself. The bronzes are shown in color and in black-and-white photos from different angles, along with where many of the pieces are located.

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In conjunction with "Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures," San Diego Museum of Art has scheduled a number of related activities.

Free lectures in the James S. Copley Auditorium:

- "Degas: The Beginning of Modern Art" by Steven Kern, curator of European art; 6 p.m. July 10.
- "The Photographic Eye of the Painter" by Carol McCusker, assistant curator of photography, and Vivian Kung Haga, San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts' director of education; 6 p.m. July 24.
- "The Sculptor and the Draftsman" by Steven Kern; 6 p.m. Aug. 7.
- "Degas and the Dance" panel discussion by San Diego choreographers Javier Velasco (San Diego Ballet), Jean Isaacs (San Diego Dance Theatre) and Nancy McCaleb (McCaleb Dance); 6 p.m. Aug. 21.

Concerts:

- "Listen to the Art: Impressionism ... Degas' Contemporaries," pianist/composer David Korevaar playing music by composers from the period; 7 p.m. Sept. 11. \$15.
- Westwind Brass: "Lyric Brass"; 7 p.m. Sept. 23. \$10.
- "Strings in the Galleries: Impressionism and Post Impressionism," guitarist Paul Galbraith, 7 p.m. Sept. 25. \$20.

Family Festival

"Degas, Bronze Horses and Dancers," noon to 4 p.m. Aug. 3. Hands-on art activities for children, entertainment and free gallery tours in English and Spanish.

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