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Degas Sculptures

8/6/2003

**Legion of Honor
18 October 2003–18 January 2004**

Degas Sculptures presents a rare opportunity to view in a single exhibition all 73 bronze sculptures by the great French Impressionist master, Edgar Degas (1834–1917). The exhibition explores one of the most fascinating aspects of the work of this seminal painter and sculptor 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 exhibition comes from the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, Brazil, and is one of only four complete sets in existence of the artist's bronzes. The other three sets reside at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen.

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Available Images

[Online Tour](#)

Also on view in *Degas Sculpture* will be a selection of approximately 16 objects from the Legion of Honor's renowned permanent collection of 19th-century sculpture. These additional pieces will serve to illustrate the importance of Degas's work within the context of that of his contemporaries and include works by Auguste Rodin, Rosa Bonheur, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Honoré Daumier, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Theodore Riviere, among others.

Featured among Degas's celebrated bathers, horses, and dancers in *Degas Sculptures* is 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 provocative and ground-breaking mixed-media sculpture, with its surprisingly harsh realism, was not well-received. Its rejection and condemnation by a number of prominent critics discouraged Degas from ever publicly showing sculpture again; however, sculpture remained a private life-long passion and pursuit known only to his friends and fellow artists, many of whom applauded him as the first modern sculptor. Upon Degas's death, approximately 150 wax and modeling clay sculptures in various states of completion and repair were found in his studio. His heirs and colleagues recognized the importance of preserving them for posterity and selected the best 73 examples to be cast in bronze.

Edgar Degas

One of the most important figures of the French art world at the end of the 19th century, Degas was the eldest son of a wealthy Parisian banking family. His relative financial security allowed him the freedom of artistic experimentation. His early training with Ingres's disciple Louis Lamothe and a brief period at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts provided Degas with a thorough grounding in the classical tradition with its emphasis on drawing and line, which he retained throughout his life. 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 starting in 1874 several of the Impressionist group's exhibitions. 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 analyzing movement in order to grasp its underlying rhythms. Like his fellow Impressionist artists, he culled his subjects from the world of urban

leisure: the racetrack, the ballet and opera, and the café-concert. Degas rarely painted from life, however, preferring to work from memory and from numerous notebooks filled with copious sketches.

Explorations in Sculpture

He 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 studies that he used to conceptualize the elaborate compositions of some of his paintings. These early sculptures reflect Degas's explorations into the nature of movement and served for him a purpose similar to that of the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, which he admired and studied.

Degas's *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* of 1881 marked in many ways a radical turning point in the artist's approach to working in sculpture. It represented not only Degas's first ambitious attempt to create a fully realized work in sculpture for public display, but also it is one of his first sculptures of the human figure, which had always been a central motif in his paintings. Made of polychrome wax, complete with a fabric bodice and tutu and real hair tied in a satin bow, *Little Dancer* was technically and conceptually revolutionary for its time and unique in Degas's sculptural oeuvre for the number of preparatory studies that have been linked with it. *Little Dancer*, along with the other sculptures in *Degas Sculpture*, demonstrate an unparalleled degree of experimentation, mixing of media, and use of advanced technology--including photography--and reveal Degas's innovative exploration of form and movement.

Admission and Ticketing

There is a \$4 surcharge for *Degas Sculptures*. Admission for the general public is \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors, \$9 for youths ages 12–17, and \$4 for children ages 5–12. Children under age 5 are free. Ticket prices include the regular admission fee to the Legion of Honor. General admission is waived every Tuesday from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., thanks to Ford Motor Company; however the \$4 special exhibition fee is still in effect. There is a \$2 discount off paid admission upon presentation of a valid MUNI transfer or Fast Pass.

Credit and Organization

The exhibition is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski and is circulated by International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee. The presentation in San Francisco is supported in part by Patelco Credit Union.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated 288-page catalogue, compiled by art historian and former museum director, Joseph S. Czestochowski, and Anne Pinget, conservateur général at the Musée d'Orsay.

Art Point Party: Dancing with Degas

Friday, 17 October 2003, Legion of Honor. 8 PM to midnight. Ticket information: (415) 750-7648, www.artpoint.org. Dancing with Degas celebrates the art of Edgar Degas and acknowledges through the theme of Brazilian culture the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, Brazil, from which the sculptures are lent. The evening includes authentic Brazilian dance, South American cuisine, live entertainment, and tours of the exhibition.