

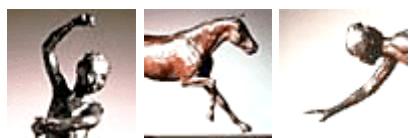
Degas thought of his sculptures as merely studies, not meant for the public eye. Was he right? Now we can judge for ourselves at the Legion of Honor

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Imagine that John Ruskin, J.M.W. Turner's executor, had not destroyed Turner's erotic watercolors in a spasm of concern for the painter's reputation.

What complexity our ways of seeing Turner's art might have gained.

Now imagine that Max Brod had honored his friend Franz Kafka's dying wish to see all his unpublished literary work destroyed. Distinctively modern experiences of authoritarianism and paranoia, by which we take our bearings even today, might still await the crystalline expression Kafka gave them.

Should the custodians of an artistic legacy respect the artist's wishes above all, above the potential value of controversial material to the world?

This question hangs over "Degas Sculptures," which opens today at the Legion of Honor, as it does over every show of Edgar Degas' three-dimensional work, such as the parallel one now at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

At his death in 1917, Degas left in his studio scores of small sculptures in wax and miscellaneous other materials. But he left no record of his intentions regarding these works, apart from having told acquaintances that he regarded them as studio exercises, necessary and important to him but unfit for exhibition.

A prolific and adventurous painter and draftsman, Degas exhibited only one sculpture in his long career, "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" (1881), and never had it cast in bronze.

Yet plainly the surviving sculptures represented a long preoccupation and much effort. Many repeat Degas' signature motifs: young ballet dancers, women bathing or drying themselves. They provide an additional angle of vision on Degas' acknowledged obsession with the expressiveness of posture, motion and viewpoint.

Or they might, had not the trail between them and his artistic intentions been so blurred.

Not long after Degas' death, his heirs authorized the renowned Hebrard Foundry to make bronzes of as many as 80 maquettes.

Apparently the sure promise of profit motivated them. But a case might be made for the posthumous casts - - had they not proliferated -- as documents of Degas' working process. But their exorbitant market value and the adamant quality of bronze cause people to view the posthumous sculptures as finished works. Perhaps, to borrow a phrase from Marcel Duchamp, they should be viewed at best as "definitively

unfinished."

That Degas had plaster molds made of three figures around 1900 might indicate his intent to see at least those cast in bronze. But he apparently reconsidered, as he never went further with them.

Three years earlier he had told an acquaintance that "my sculptures will never give the impression of being finished, which is the termination of a sculptor's workmanship, and after all, since no one will ever see these rough sketches, nobody will dare to talk about them. . . . This will be the best for my reputation."

The exhibition at the Legion comes from Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, Brazil, one of the few institutions that boasts a "complete" collection of 73 Degas bronzes dating from the early years after his death.

As time passed, confusion spread -- though with no effect on collector demand -- as to the authenticity and true number of the posthumous bronzes, the limits on editions and the works' steadily widening distance from Degas' hand.

In the mid-'50s, Hebrard rediscovered all but a few of Degas' mixed-media originals from which the first bronzes had been made. They stand closer to Degas' artistic impulses than any posthumous casts could. But their very survival might represent a betrayal of Degas' wishes by circumstance.

Paul Mellon acquired the originals and gave them to the National Gallery of Art, which keeps a selection of them on view.

About 20 years later, Hebrard put up for sale the master casts in bronze from which they had made all the subsequent authorized casts. These objects also presumably stood closer to Degas' hand than later casts and so were reckoned a major discovery.

Norton Simon bought them for the collection that founded the Pasadena museum that bears his name.

This bizarre history says that in a sense we cannot be sure what we see of Degas when we explore "Degas Sculptures." This fact has the ironic effect of keeping the sculptures alive in the setting of contemporary art, where even informed viewers confront odd uncertainties about what appears obvious.

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