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Degas, iconoclast of sculpture

By Jerome Tarshis

During his lifetime, Edgar Degas (1834-1917), one of the greatest artists of the 19th century, was known to the art public for his paintings and pastels. Their subjects called up the most conventional ideas of pleasure: race horses and jockeys, ballet dancers, and nude women. But if the pleasures were familiar, the pictures were not. Throughout his career, Degas engaged in a restless search for new ways to depict animal and human bodies in motion.

Only visitors to his studio saw another side of his production: sculpture in clay and wax, which he did in tandem with his better-known work. The sculptures were extravagantly admired by many who saw them: the painter Renoir said Degas was the greatest sculptor of his time.

Degas himself spoke more modestly: "The only reason that I made wax figures of animals and humans," he told an interviewer, "was for my own satisfaction, not to take time off from painting or drawing, but in order to give my paintings and drawings greater expression, greater ardor, and more life. They are exercises to get me going: documentary, preparatory notions, nothing more."

In depicting horses in motion Degas drew inspiration from stop-action photography. He never exactly imitated photographs, perhaps because the freeze-frame look gave too static an impression and he wanted to suggest continuing movement. But he knew Eadweard Muybridge's studies of human and animal locomotion quite well, and the position of his masterly "Horse Galloping on Right Foot" comes close to Muybridge's

During Degas's lifetime, the public saw only one of his many sculptures in wax, "Little Dancer, Aged 14", which was greeted with massive disapproval at the Impressionist exhibition of 1881. Sculpture had been, up to then, largely intended to commemorate, and those commemorated were likely to be distinguished or rich.

By contrast, this young girl, her ordinary looks modeled with a degree of skill arguably better suited to the idealized portrayal of saints or Greek goddesses, puzzled its first viewers. By the standards of academic art the girl seemed vulgar, and the vulgarity of the sculpture seemed only heightened by the use of real hair and, in her ribbon and ballet dress and shoes, real cloth.

A minority opinion was expressed by the French novelist and art critic J.K. Huysmans, who wrote, "The fact is that at one fell swoop M. Degas has overthrown the traditions of sculpture, as he has for a long time been shaking up the conventions of painting." The more general view was that the figure was all too realistic. Degas never again exhibited sculpture, apparently preferring to use it as a medium for private experiments.

After Degas's death, his executors and well-wishers decided to give permanent form to what little survived of his sculpture. Many of the waxes were in poor condition, and the artist himself had destroyed many others; as a supreme painter of motion, he seems to have distrusted permanence.

Nevertheless, 73 of the surviving sculptures were cast in bronze. After seeing them the artist Mary Cassatt wrote, "I believe he will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter."

- *The Degas sculptures, together with related works by him and others, are at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco through Jan. 18.*