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In celebration of a unique temporary exhibition, the Art Gallery of Ontario is offering a rare chance for the public to view these traditional works of art through a contemporary lens.

Seventy-three bronze sculptures by Edgar Degas make up the Beyond the Canvas exhibition, which runs until Jan. 4. This collection of bronzes is one of only four complete sets in existence. On loan from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, this exhibition marks the first time the collection has been displayed in North America.

Known primarily as a painter, Degas exhibited just one sculpture in his lifetime. Titled Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen, this sculpture, clothed in a real tulle tutu, forms the centrepiece of the exhibit. The AGO's adult program co-ordinator, Gillian McIntyre, acknowledges the challenge in attracting visitors to what is essentially a specialist exhibition.

"My job is to look at an exhibition and figure out the bridge between the art and the people – what's going to be interesting, what's relevant and how I can engage a broad audience," McIntyre said.

Experimental programming

Among the varied programs being offered in connection with the Degas exhibition is the Refiguring Degas course. This hands-on course runs for six weeks and features instructors from various art backgrounds, including dancers and modern artists.

McIntyre notes that this course is an "experiment" and its multidisciplinary approach and location within the gallery space are a first for the AGO.

"The arts are very artificially separated; they belong together," McIntyre said. "The AGO should be involved in the experimental side of art as well as the classical, traditional, established art."

Despite the lack of signage instructing visitors what to do, the workspace within the exhibit is being used heavily, according to McIntyre. The result is a layered effect of drawings by school children,



Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen: exhibit's centrepiece

accomplished artists and everyone in between.

"The theory (is) that if people tune their eye in a bit, and sit and try to draw, that they will see a little differently," McIntyre said. "They might go out and view the sculptures in a different way."

Combining dance, drawing and sculpture

Fascinated by movement and the female body, Degas created wax sculptures in order to help give a three-dimensional quality to his renowned paintings of ballet dancers and bathers. Of the 73 sculptures, more than half are dancers.

"He invented dance as a subject and I find that remarkable," European department educator David Wistow said. "When he died, it died with him. No other artist has ever dedicated themselves to dance in the same way as Degas."

Indeed, the marriage of the Degas exhibition with the National Ballet seemed obvious to McIntyre and her colleagues. A highlight of the course involves a visit to the National Ballet to sketch the ballerinas rehearsing.

At the first session of the Refiguring Degas course, acclaimed dance artist Peggy Baker donned the garb of ballet dancers in the time of Degas and treated participants to a performance. Baker has choreographed two dances for the course that will blend modern and traditional ballet.



Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

Also on hand was Richard Sewell, an art instructor at Sheridan College, who aims to integrate the works and inspiration of Degas into a contemporary style of art. He will teach participants how to employ a "body awareness type of drawing," which will aid them in capturing the grace and beauty of the ballerinas.

"Artists use ideas and bodies to create their works of art," Sewell said. "These things are done through process."

Ready for adventure

McIntyre, who aims to provide an "intimate experience" for visitors, called the group of 16 involved in the Refiguring Degas course brave and adventurous. The participants represent a variety of backgrounds and demonstrated different degrees of artistic talent.

"I've always enjoyed painting and drawing dancers," Darlene Buckingham said. "My interest as an artist is capturing energy flow and capturing the human spirit."

The participants are joined by their passion for Impressionist art and ballet as well as a desire to expand their knowledge and ability through contemporary means.

"I can't seem to draw people with clothes on," Danielle Fraser joked. "But a tutu should be okay."

Although the Refiguring Degas course is running at full capacity,

visitors can still explore the Degas sculptures through other programs. Ongoing life drawing classes, artist demonstrations, lectures and slideshows will continue throughout the run of the exhibition. Specific dates and times can be found at www.ago.net.

And if it's food, not art, that appeals to your senses, the AGO's Agora restaurant is offering a limited-time Parisian bistro menu in honour of the Degas sculptures.

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