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Degas undefined
Sculptures at the AGO are impressive enough, but shed little light
on what motivated the artist, SARAH MILROY writes

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Advertisement

'My sculptures will never give the impression of being finished, which is the termination of a sculptor's workmanship," Degas wrote to his friend François Thiébault-Sisson in 1897, "and after all, since no one will ever see these rough sketches, nobody will dare to talk about them, not even you. From this day forward until my death, this will all be destroyed by itself and this will be best for my reputation."

How, then, must the mustachioed ghost of Edgar Degas writhe at the prospect of yet another exhibition, this time at Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario, devoted to his sculpture. Or to be more precise, an exhibition of bronze replicas of his sculptures.

Degas, in fact, made sculpture privately, in his studio, from an assortment of quotidian and damnably ephemeral materials (wax, clay, string, cork, wire and the like), and he exhibited but one of these wax sculptures during his lifetime, the remarkable Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen, shown in the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881. Degas never made bronzes. His heirs did.

In the museum world, however, consensus holds that the objects bear some relation to the artist's private artistic process, and that, however vexed they may be from the point of view of artistic

authenticity, they are worthy of a place in the history of art. The question then becomes: What do they obscure and what do they reveal about their maker?

What they obscure, ironically, is precisely the nature of Degas's contribution to sculpture. The representations of race horses, ballerinas and bathers rendered here in bronze were originally created from an ad hoc amalgam of bits and pieces.

The Tub, which features a nude woman lounging in a shallow zinc bath, was originally made of wax (the flesh), plaster (the water in the tub) and fabric (the crushed covering on the low pedestal), and featured a real lead basin. (Some sources say she even held a real sponge in her hand.) The Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen shocked Parisian audiences in part because of the strange amalgamation of wax (her flesh), doll's hair, canvas, ribbon and tulle -- a material treatment that situated the likeness halfway between the high-art traditions of sculpture and the emerging popular phenomenon of the waxwork replica.

The fact that Degas, with but one exception, made the works for his private use shouldn't lead us to underestimate his role in advancing the use of found objects and materials in his art, a practice that resonates with the sculptural improvisations of the 20th century, from Picasso to Rauschenberg and beyond. Experience these forms cast in bronze, however, and that fundamental innovation is obscured. All that being said, the bronzes make interesting viewing.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the sculptures reveal the artist's preoccupation with gesture, an interest that also animates the paintings, from the stiff and highly fraught display of emotional solitudes in The Bellelli Family group portrait of 1858 to 1867, to the dejected absinthe drinker slumped at her café table in the famous painting of 1875, to the creaturely contortions of his late bathers, such as the AGO's Woman at Her Bath of 1895, included as an addendum to the current exhibition.

One senses that Degas's manipulations of the human form in three dimensions served as a way of burrowing into the mystery of human feeling revealed in poses. The Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen in the classic example of this.

Each view of the sculpture seems to present a different aspect of her personality. From the front, we get the attentive stance of a dancer awaiting instruction. From the side, the street urchin's jutting chin smacks of defiance and her thin shoulders and sagging

abdomen suggest exhaustion and poverty. From the rear, Degas gives us the subtle backward stretch of the shoulder blades and the slight sway of her hips to the left supporting leg, implying a cocky, pent-up physicality.

Regardless of Degas's own assessment of his skills as a sculptor, we today are at liberty to admire his remarkable ability to create character through form.

The sculptures also alert us, in a blunt way, to the nature of Degas's interest in his subjects. While the popular imagination might hold a somewhat saccharine view of Degas as the maker of painterly ballerina confections, the truth lies elsewhere. Degas's three great themes -- in the paintings and the sculptures -- were the ballerina, the race horse and the prostitute (or so many have assumed the bathers to be, given their settings and poses) -- animal and human performers who met the needs of a burgeoning Parisian bourgeoisie thirsty for entertainment in these dawning days of urban spectacle. The sculptures give us an unvarnished look at these figures, which were both fetishized and exploited by their public. Those expecting idealized sylphs will be disappointed. These are working girls, some scrawny, others as hefty as cart horses, and we see them again and again here not in moments of aesthetic transport, but earthbound -- adjusting their slippers, stretching their tired backs, pulling on their shoulder straps, or yanking up their leggings. One sculpture gives us the dancer turned awkwardly on her side as her leg is pummelled by a masseuse, every inch the slab of meat being prepared for the feast of public consumption. Overwhelmingly, the sculptures suggest a lack of ease, and the hard labour that was the lot of Paris's working poor.

There is, then, a lot to think about here -- that is, if you happen to start out with a generous understanding of Degas's work as a whole. But it's hard to imagine what a less prepared member of the public might make of this nakedly uningratiating display -- simply the bronzes on plinths in room after room. The show, which presents Copenhagen's full set of 73 bronzes (there are only four such complete sets in existence), is presented with an austere minimum of context. We are offered only the most cursory sense of Degas the man, of how his sculpture compares with the work of other sculptors, of the role of women in his art (the subject of countless articles and dissertations for decades now), of Paris at the turn of the century, of the period interest in motion studies triggered by the work of Edward Muybridge, or of the life of the opera house and the racetrack as experienced by both its denizens and patrons. For a blockbuster, which this must surely be intended to be, it is

an extraordinarily chilly, and conservative, presentation. This is not to say the gallery couldn't have achieved a warmer experience, had it crafted an exhibition that would fully exploit the potential of the subject (pick any of the above themes, for example), or had the curators had the time to contemplate an augmented presentation. (The show wasn't booked to come to Toronto until this January.) Instead, by accepting and staging a show such as this, Copenhagen's lack of imagination becomes our own. The question dangles: Why stage a show that attempts so little when there is so much still to be done in fleshing out the Parisian fin de siècle's most mysterious and intriguing master? On this most fascinating subject, this exhibition has nothing to say.

Degas Sculptures continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto until Jan. 4.

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