

All painting, no matter what you're painting, is abstract in that it's got to be organized.
David Hockney



Founded in 2000

Ars est celare artem.
Ovid

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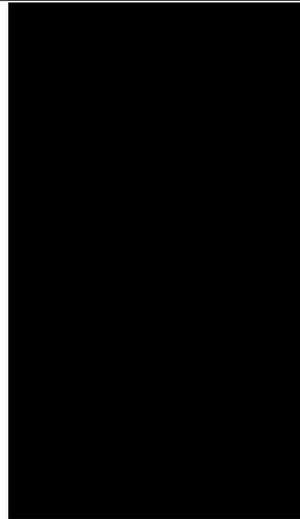
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Little Dancer, Aged 14



By Alidè Kohlhaas

When the name Edgar Degas comes to mind, images of paintings and drawings of dancers on stage, backstage, and in dancing classes are called forth. These images are not glamorous, although they have an attractive charm, which, nevertheless, does not deny their realistic representation - realistic in the sense that they show the dancer at work, not as an idolized puppet. Degas is also famous for his painting, **A Glass of Absinthe** (right), which captures the empty, disillusioned, loneliness mirrored in the faces of a woman and man in a bar. It reveals what Degas was all about: capturing not only an image, but also the mood, the psychology of the subject.



Degas was a man of many talents. He not only painted and drew his subjects with the extraordinary skill of a draftsman, but he was also a great colourist, a printmaker, a photographer, and a highly skilled sculptor. Yet, with the exception of one outstanding work of unusual sculpture, this

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particular talent of his remained hidden from the public until after his death.

Now, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), those who want to gain a greater insight into this unknown talent possessed by Degas can delve into his three-dimensional work; they can even sit down to draw his sculptures without feeling that they are intruding. [Degas Sculptures from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek](#), Copenhagen, which is on view until January 4, 2004, invites such intimate perusal of the artist's work. These figures, all cast in bronze after his death in 1917, are one of only four complete sets of his sculptures in existence. The exhibit is augmented by a small collection from the AGO of works by Degas on paper and canvas. They serve to illuminate the period in which the undated sculptures may have been created.



Woman Washing Her Hair

Degas was born Hilaire Germain Edgar de Gas on July 1834, in Paris. He came from minor, well-to-do French aristocracy, who had turned to banking to make a living. Although he began to study law, he soon turned to art and attended École Beaux-Arts, where he studied under a disciple of French classicist J.A.D. Ingres. It is there that he developed his outstanding ability to draw. It was said of him that he could have

become his period's greatest portrait painter, but his interests lay elsewhere, much to our gain.



Although eventually he would display his works with the budding Impressionist movement, he never fully became part of it. Like his contemporary, Edouard Manet (at left), his work created in the 1870s and '80s shows impressionist tendencies with one very distinct difference. Like Manet, he was interested in the social aspects of life. These two artists preferred to be labelled as naturalists, who showed great objectivity in the depiction of people and the things that surrounded them. Not for Degas the fleeting moments captured outdoors by the Impressionists, and the obsession with light. He preferred to work in the studio with models.

What is also interesting about Degas (he contracted the two parts of his name into one sometime along the way) is that at a time when most artists become more cautious as they grow older, and often tend to repeat themselves, Degas went the opposite way. In the last half of his working life he showed far greater daring, and he experimented much more to achieve what he wanted to represent than he did in his early career. This was brought about, in part, by his failing eyesight. Rather than despair, he chose the medium of pastels, crayons and charcoal to achieve his aims, and he worked his ideas out in wax and clay sculptures, although he never showed these three-dimensional works publicly.

The only time he broke from this mould, so to speak, was in 1881, when at the sixth Impressionist exhibit in Paris he showed his wax sculpture called [Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen](#) (see above). It caused considerable consternation and offense to critics and public alike with comments of

"vulgar" and "low" heard throughout Paris. Why? Degas had done what has probably never again been repeated — he added clothing and doll's hair to increase the realism of his work — and so caused outrage among a public that looked for heroism in sculpture, not truth.

Not everyone was outraged by [The Little Dancer](#). The novelist *Joris-Karl Huysmans*, who as a writer belonged to the naturalist school that we identify with Emile Zola, had this to say about Degas' sculpture at the '81 exhibition. *"The chief attraction of this exhibition is not, this year, to be found among his drawings or paintings . . . it is a single figure of wax . . . from which the public, quite bewildered, embarrassed, runs away. The frightful realism of this statuette evidently makes people uncomfortable; all its ideas on sculpture, on that cold, inanimate white object, on those memorable imitations copied over and over for centuries, are upset. The fact is that, at one blow, M. Degas has overturned the tradition of sculpture as he long ago weakened the conventions of painting . . ."*

[The Little Dancer](#) is, indeed, an amazing work. She is not a pretty girl, but exhibits a strong character, and a defiant pose that definitely draw one's attention. The sculpture is, in its stark naturalism, highly appealing. There is an irony to this work. Having become his most famously known sculpture, the girl, one Marie van Goethem, who served as his model, never reached the sculpture's fame in her own life. At age 17 she was fired from her ballet company for not attending classes and nothing more can be found out about her. It is presumed that she turned to prostitution to make a living, for she had no other education, and no doubt ended up in the squalid oblivion of such a life. Since she modelled both clothed and in the nude for Degas, perhaps one can draw the conclusion that the child learned that it is easier to earn a living undressed than slogging away in ballet.

Degas is quoted as saying that he turned to sculpture to give his paintings and drawings "greater expression, greater ardour, and more life." Although Pierre-Auguste Renoir declared that Degas was "the greatest living sculptor", Degas obviously saw his little wax and clay pieces as a mere adjunct to his work. In this exhibit one can see him groping toward understanding of the female body in various poses, nude and dressed. Then there is his obvious love for horses. He was concerned with the complexity of movement and each horse in this display shows how he attacks the problem of placing a three-dimensional object into space to make the onlooker feel the power of movement.



[Dancer, Fourth Position Front, on Left Leg](#)



[Grand Arabesque, Third Time](#)



Woman resting Head on One Hand, Bust



Horse Trotting



Horse Walking



Woman Washing Her Left Leg

While the 73 bronzes from the Danish museum, plus three from the AGO give one a glimpse of what Degas tried to achieve with his wax sculptures, the show lacks a certain oomph. Although displayed in seven different rooms according to subject, whether it be his bathing women, the dancers or the horses, after a while all that bronze begins to pale. The few drawings and paintings that the AGO added help to infuse a little spark, but one wishes for more. Still, it is an experience to view Degas from this perspective.

One thing, though, I feel, is irrelevant. Both here in Toronto and at a similar show in San Francisco a great deal of outrage has been expressed by critics because these bronzes were cast after the death of Degas, and so are by some seen as not being the "real" thing. It reminds me of the kerfuffle made at the time of the completion of [Spirit of Haida Gwaii](#), the sculpture created by Bill Reid that is on display at the Canadian Embassy in Washington. There were those who claimed that it was not Reid's work because he had helpers to finish it, and the bronze was cast only with him overseeing the casting. This is normal. All great sculptors had assistants. The plaster cast of [Haida Gwaii](#), by the way, is on display at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

No sculptor ever completes his own sculpture to the intricate process of bronze casting. All bronzes are what might be called a reflection of an original wax, plaster or clay model. It is up to foundry workers to cast the bronze, and the AGO goes to great pains to show in a very good film how this process takes place. It must also be said in the defence of the AGO that at no time did the gallery claim to display "originals".

What is perhaps disturbing is the fact that the foundry run by Adrien-A. Hébrard did not adhere to the wishes of Degas' estate that only 22 pieces be cast of each figure. This implies that at various places some bronzes are floating around, which may not be of the quality that they should be. The more one casts of an original, the more the quality changes. But this is neither here nor there. Degas knew Hébrard and also the Milanese caster,

Albino Palazzolo, who cast the bronzes for Hébrard. Those who object to this show say that if Degas had wanted to have the wax figures cast, he would have done so in his life-time. It is known that the artist spoke repeatedly of having plaster casts made of his work, but somehow only three or four were made while he lived. Why is something that remains a conjecture. It surely is not worth all of the claims of hucksterism thrown at the AGO and San Francisco's Legion of Honor. Instead, one appreciates that one is given an opportunity to view Degas from a quite different vantage point, one that is unexpected, but very much in keeping with what the man was all about.



Edgar Degas, Washerwomen

Degas Sculptures from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek is on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario until January 4, 2004

Sculptural images: Collection of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen © 2003 Ole Haupt, Courtesy International Arts, Memphis

For comment about the Degas controversy, click here 

None of the drawings and paintings shown in this review are part of the AGO exhibition

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