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**Indepth Arts News:****"All 73 sculptures by Edgar Degas"**

2004-02-29 until 2004-05-30

**Phoenix Art Museum**

Phoenix, AZ, USA

Phoenix Art Museum is pleased to present an extremely rare opportunity to view all 73 bronze sculptures by the great French Impressionist master, Edgar Degas, in a single exhibition – Degas in Bronze, February 29 – May 30, 2004. The exhibition offers an intimate understanding of how Degas evolved to become an important impressionist artist and a fuller view of his creative genius for representing the figure in motion. He looked at life in Paris with a new eye, especially through his two favorite subjects, dancers and horses – they shared an array of motion, pose and expression, to which Degas dedicated his career. These concepts permeate his sculptures, as explored in this exhibition, as well as his paintings, pastels, prints, drawings and photographs.



Featured among Degas's celebrated dancers, bathers and horses in Degas in Bronze is the famed Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen. This single sculpture, worked on by Degas for two years, may be the most historically important sculpture in French art of the 19th century. This masterpiece was the only sculpture Degas exhibited in his lifetime when he included it in the sixth exhibition of impressionist art in Paris in 1881. The groundbreaking mixed-media work was so roundly condemned at the time by a number of prominent critics that Degas was discouraged from ever showing the sculpture again. Many of his fellow Impressionists, however, applauded him as the first modern sculptor. His close friend Mary Cassatt stated, "I believe he will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter," and Pierre-Auguste Renoir went so far as to proclaim Degas "the greatest living sculptor."

"Rarely do we have an opportunity to see in so intimate a fashion the artist's exploration of his subjects," said Jim Ballinger, the Museum's director. "In fact, Degas's fingerprints, left behind as he shaped these forms, are visible today in many of these bronze sculptures. We are delighted to be able to present to the community this rare opportunity to explore this great artist as sculptor."

Degas in Bronze explores one of the most fascinating aspects of Degas's work. His innovative compositions, skillful drawing,

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and perceptive analysis of movement made him one of the masters of modern art in the late 19th century. The collection of 73 sculptures in the show is one of only four remaining complete sets of Degas bronzes, which were cast shortly after the artist's death. It comes from the collection of Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil, and the exhibition is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski, International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee. The Arizona presentation of Degas in Bronze is made possible by Bank One, SRP, Barbara C. Dow and the Museum's Connoisseur's Circle.

## About Degas

One of the most important figures of the French art world at the close of the 19th century, Degas was the eldest son of a wealthy Parisian banking family, born in 1834. The relative financial security he enjoyed throughout his career allowed him the freedom to experiment artistically without concern for selling his work. His early training with Ingres disciple Louis Lamothe and a brief stint at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts provided Degas with a thorough grounding in the classical tradition, with its emphasis on drawing and line, which stayed with Degas throughout his lifetime. A pivotal encounter with Édouard Manet during a visit to the Louvre in 1862 led to his introduction to a group of young artists meeting at the Café Guérbois, who soon would become known as the Impressionists.

Though he preferred to consider himself a "realist" or "naturalist" rather than an "impressionist," Degas organized several exhibitions of the Impressionists, starting in 1874. Regardless of the medium in which he worked – painting, sculpture, pastel, drawing, etching, lithography or monotype – Degas showed himself to be a keen observer of everyday scenes, capturing natural positions and breaking down movement in order to grasp its underlying rhythms. Typical of his fellow Impressionists, he culled his subjects from the world of urban leisure: the racetrack, the ballet and opera, and the café-concert. Unlike the Impressionists, however, Degas rarely painted en plein-air – outside, directly from nature. He preferred to work from memory and from sketches.

Degas began to make small sculptures in wax in the late 1860s, the first of these coinciding with his growing fascination with scenes from the racetrack. The many wax sculptures of horses and jockeys he created during this period functioned as three-dimensional sketches that he used to conceptualize the elaborate compositions of some of his paintings. These early sculptures were thus tools in Degas's explorations of the nature of movement.

Degas's Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen of 1881 marked a radical turning point in the artist's approach to working in sculpture in a number of ways. It represented not only Degas's first ambitious attempt to create a fully realized work in sculpture for public exhibition, but it is one of his very first sculptures of the Degas in Bronze – add two

human figure, which had always been a central motif in his paintings. Made of polychrome wax, a fabric bodice and tutu,

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and real hair tied in a satin bow, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* was technically and conceptually revolutionary for its time and unique among Degas's sculptural works for the number of preparatory studies that have been tied to it.

By viewing a series of eight of Degas's dancers called *Arabesques*, one sees through his sculptural eye the beauty of line toward which a great dancer strives. In fact, it is as if the sculptor created a three-dimensional time-lapse study of a female dancer's grace and energy. He did so through years of backstage and rehearsal observation. At the same moment, Eadweard Muybridge in America, and Étienne-Jules Marey in France, were pioneering similar photographic studies of both human action and that of a horse. While Degas admired and studied their work, the expressive quality of his art far supercedes that of the more scientifically based photographers.

Degas's work in sculpture was unconventional in its combination of materials and techniques. He primarily worked with clay, wax, plaster, cloth, and plastilene – a non-drying wax-and-oil-based modeling clay. He often would go back and rework details of pose and form in his sculptures, leaving fingerprints and marks of his tools that offer remarkable insight into his creative process.

Degas's experiments in sculpture increased from the mid-1880s – perhaps due in part to his failing eyesight – though from this point on it became a completely private undertaking for him. Shunning public exhibition of his work in wax and clay, he showed them only to the friends and colleagues who visited his studio. Degas's work in sculpture was primarily motivated by his innate artistic curiosity and quest for perfection, less so by a desire to create works for public display. He did, however, recognize the enduring importance of his work when he wrote to fellow artist Aristide Maillol, "perhaps one of these days [my work] shall be cast in bronze."

Upon Degas's death in 1917, approximately 150 wax and modeling clay sculptures were found in his studio in various states of completion and repair. His heirs and colleagues immediately recognized the importance of preserving these works for posterity and decided to cast in bronze the 73 best examples. These works demonstrate an unparalleled degree of experimentation, mixing of media, and use of advanced technology, including photography, and reveal Degas's innovative explorations of form and movement.

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