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Degas bronzes invite awe

Photos courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum

"Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is one of 73 bronzes on loan from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil

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By Kathleen Allen
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

PHOENIX - Women bathing, horses galloping and dancers dressing fill a few small rooms at the Phoenix Art Museum.

They dance, they breathe, they are disturbingly realistic.

They are bronze sculptures by the 19th-20th-century artist Edgar Degas.

If you go

"Degas in Bronze" is at the Phoenix Art Museum, 1625 N. Central Ave., through May 30. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays through Sundays; and 10 a.m. - 9 p.m. Thursdays. Admission to the Degas exhibit, not specially ticketed, is \$12 for adults, \$6 for children 6 to 17, and free for museum members and children under 6. The "American Beauty" exhibition, which has been extended through April 4, and visits to the general museum galleries

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And he never laid an eye on any of them.

Degas' fame was due to his paintings. His sculptures were all done in wax, studies for his paintings.

He showed only one sculpture in his lifetime, "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," and that was a wax figurine with real hair tied back in a green satin bow, a tutu and bodice made of fabric.

Her head was thrown back in a haughty pose, her young belly protruding, hands behind her back.

Degas displayed it at the 1881 Impressionist exhibition in Paris. It caused an uproar. The body offended, the look was off-putting, the mixed-media approach was just not done. It was branded "vulgar" and "low."

And it moved his contemporary, the artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, to call Degas "the greatest living sculptor."

Degas never again showed a sculpture nor ever had them bronzed.

"He had no intention of having them cast," said art historian Julie Anne Plax of the University of Arizona School of Art.

"They were small, working models."

After Degas' death in 1917, his studio was found stuffed with 150 wax and modeling-clay sculptures. Some were incomplete, others broken and in such disrepair that they were destroyed.

His family authorized 73 of the works to be cast in bronze in limited editions.

There were squabbles and mysteries surrounding the castings, and many unauthorized sculptures are thought to have been cast. But four complete sets of the bronzes are believed to exist.

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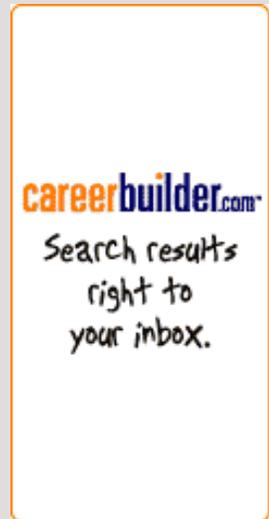
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One of those sets, on loan from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil, is at the Phoenix Art Museum. "Degas in Bronze," a rare opportunity to view a complete set, continues through May 30.

It's a glimpse into how the great artist worked, said Plax.

"When you look at those private, working models, it's a way of seeing how an artist thinks."

Degas' fascination with the world of dance is recorded in his paintings, as well as his sculptures.

He attended the ballet regularly, went backstage, watched rehearsals and hired dancers to work as his models.

He also lost himself in horses and visited friends with horse farms often.

"His interest was in trying to capture the posturing, the motions of the human body or horses," said Jim Ballinger, director of the Phoenix Art Museum. "The whole idea of motion was in the air then. People were trying to figure out how to capture motion."

Degas would bring models to his studio to watch them move and record what he saw.

"He would hire models, and instead of posing them he would say 'take off your clothes and walk around, go take a bath,' " Plax said.

"Rather than depicting a goddess, he turned to real life and real-life subjects and depicted them in moments of repose, rather than pose."

That led to one of the reasons his "Little Dancer" sculpture received such a shocking reaction.

"Sculpture had traditionally been associated with the ideal," explained Plax. "The thought was that art should be beautiful and transcendent, not something ordinary."

His approach made him one of the first Modernist sculptors, said Ballinger.

"You want to put him in the proper context," said Ballinger. "He was interested in movement, not detail. These guys (the Impressionists) were interested in a much more fast-moving world. They were trying to capture



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the verve of a vital urban world."

"Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is about 39 inches tall. The hair is no longer real - it's bronzed and tied in a yellow ribbon. The tutu is still fabric, though the bodice, textured to look real, is bronzed.

It's the one not to miss in the show, said Ballinger. "This one piece is so spectacular, you have to celebrate it."

It isn't the only work that demands attention.

At one end of the gallery is "The Tub." A woman sits in a shallow tub, bathing herself. Her left leg is over her right, and she is reaching down washing the foot with a sponge. Her hair spills over the back of the tub. It's such a private moment you feel you should avert your eyes.

Nearby is "Horse in Motion," a stunning sculpture of a horse balking, its back legs splayed. The instinct is to step out of his way to avoid the commotion.

In the center of the gallery is a series of sculptures, a sort of time lapse of dancers going deeper and deeper into an arabesque position. It's like watching a motion picture.

In another part of the gallery is "Woman Arranging Her Hair." The nude has her long hair in her hands, pulling it to one side. It's a moment that smacks of reality.

In these and all the works on display, there's a sense of immediacy, as well as a sense that you are peeking in on something intimate and accurate.

While details may be missing on some of the sculptures, a limb lost here, a face never sculpted there, Degas' pursuit of perfection and commitment to capturing what is real, rather than what is imagined, is clear.

Would he be pleased? If he never attempted to bronze any of his sculptures (though evidence exists that he at least contemplated it) should the works be shown now?

Absolutely, said Plax.

"There's no control over the work unless there's some kind of stipulation," she said. Degas left no such stipulation when he died in 1917.

"Once the art leaves its home, the artist's intentions don't really matter that much. It's like a child that goes out into the world."

These works, said Ballinger, are what they would have been had Degas himself had them cast. And they are essential tools to seeing the the sculptor's intentions.

"When he died, his heirs decided the only way to save the sculptures was to cast them," he said. "There was no change from what Degas had done in wax. It's a great way of understanding his works."

° Contact Kathleen Allen at allkat@azstarnet.com or 573-4128.

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Degas bronzes invite awe



Photos courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum

"Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is one of 73 bronzes on loan from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil

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Photos courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum

"Horse Galloping and Jockey," from a complete set of bronzes (only four such sets are known to exist) at the Phoenix Art Museum.

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"Woman Rubbing Her Back With a Sponge," modeled around 1890.

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Like the other sculptures, "Dancer Fourth Position Front" was not cast in bronze until after Degas' death in 1917. Originals were wax or modeling clay.

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Spanish Dance and 72 other Degas sculptures will be on view in Phoenix through May 30.

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"Dancer at Rest, Hands Behind Her Back, Right Leg Forward" is thought to have been modeled sometime in the 1880s.

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