

Degas' sculptures show ordinary people

By Sandy Yang, Associated Press Writer, 3/8/2004

PHOENIX -- In an era when art favored goddesses and kings, Edgar Degas broke the rules by capturing ordinary people in private moments -- from a woman in a bathtub to a ballerina pulling up a stocking.

Degas' willingness to push such sensibilities drew intense criticism in 1881 when the French impressionist exhibited his sculpture of a young dancer dressed in a cloth tutu and a wig of human hair. Today, "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" and other works show Degas as a visionary who influenced future artists.

"Little Dancer" and 72 other bronze sculptures by Degas are on view at the Phoenix Art Museum through May 30.

"It is one of the most important groups of sculptures produced in the 19th century," Tom Loughman, curator of European art at the Phoenix Art Museum, said. "His work anticipated modernism and the art history that would form in the years following his death."

The traveling show, which is nearing the end of its six-city tour, will make a final stop at the Boise Art Museum before it returns to the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo in Brazil.

Of the exhibit pieces, only "Little Dancer" was presented publicly during Degas' life. It was modeled after a 14-year-old dance student named Marie van Goethem and portrayed a girl with a haughty expression, her head tilted upward and her lanky arms pulled back.

Reaction ranged from praise that Degas had created the first modern sculpture to criticism that it was a sad representation of adolescence. It was, however, just another example of the artist's commitment to portray his subjects realistically rather than as objects for admiration.

"Degas was painting bathrooms and naked women of no particular beauty. He was looking searchingly at pregnant and elderly female figures and finding in it something as glorious and redolent as the divine," said Douglas Lewis, the curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where Degas' original wax sculptures are preserved.

The wax sculptures were used to create molds from which the bronzes were cast.

Born into a wealthy family in 1834, Degas studied the classical styles at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, which preserved and promoted art taken from mythology, Greek and Roman history and the

Bible. But because Degas didn't need to sell his works to survive, he had more freedom to experiment.

Bucking traditions in the late 19th century, he joined the company of Edouard Manet and Claude Monet, who sought artistry from everyday life and became known as the impressionists.

Degas' favorite subjects were dancers, horses and female bathers, who were shown in poses and gestures as if caught in a snapshot from their daily rituals. He would often be found in dance rehearsal halls or at racetracks in Paris, where he would make sketches before working on a piece in his studio. Other times, he would ask dancers and other subjects to pose for him.

From those studies, he produced sculptures entitled, "Dancer Adjusting the Shoulder Strap of her Bodice" or "Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot" -- more examples of Degas' desire to strip away all facades and glorify seemingly mundane moments.

"He went to such places and went behind the scenes to look at the real life of the fantasy of which is presented in the arts," Lewis said. "He is the great inventor of walking into the bathroom, walking into a ballet rehearsal room. What he was willing to do was to go where people had not gone before."

During Degas' lifetime, art lovers warmed to the impressionists' vision and the idea that everyday life was a source of beauty, after four centuries of art that believed in the contrary, Jim Ballinger, director of the Phoenix Art Museum, said.

Though Degas only exhibited one sculpture in his life and was more famous for his paintings and pastels, his heirs found 150 sculptures in his studio after his death in 1917 and bronzed 73 of them. He had focused on sculptures later in his career when his eyesight was failing. He died at age 83.

Casts of his sculptures were made in the two decades after Degas' death, and only four complete sets of the bronze sculptures exist today.

"(The sculptures) are fascinating because it's a new look to what Degas did to broaden people's understanding to how revolutionary he was," Ballinger said.

On the Net:

Phoenix Art Museum: <http://www.phxart.org>

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