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## Edgar Degas' bronzes bring movement alive at BAM

Dancers in partial ports de bras, bathers reclined, enjoying the water's caress and horses beautifully captured on their furious way to nowhere. These frozen movements gleam in bronze under delicately lit display cases at the Boise Art Museum in "Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures." The exhibit opens today.

Some unfinished, others with heavily textured surfaces, they all give the impression of life and motion that marked Edgar Degas' paintings and drawings.

"They have a sense of spontaneity and a wonderful tactile quality," says John Taye (pronounced "Tie"), a painter and sculptor and Boise State University art professor. "You can see where he's used the clay and moved it between his fingers." Though Degas did not pursue sculpture during his lifetime beyond a personal passion, he is today easily considered one of the best of his age.

The exhibit of 73 posthumously-cast bronze sculptures will be on display through Sept. 18, along with an exhibit of work by contemporary glass sculptor William Morris, which runs through Oct. 17. Each of these exhibits alone would be a large undertaking for the museum. Together they're a "blockbuster," says museum executive director Timothy Close.

"This is pushing the envelope, totally," he says. "It started with Chihuly in 2001."

"After that we decided that each summer we want to do a blockbuster exhibition."

The museum will show a Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit in summer 2005, and a Frank Lloyd Wright exhibit in 2006. Close also said the museum will continue to support younger contemporary artists with Northwest Perspectives.

The Degas exhibit is one of the biggest and it is the most expensive in the museum's history, although Close won't reveal the total cost. The museum received large donations to pull the exhibit together, including money from the Albertson and Carnahan foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The bronzes themselves are priceless, Close says. They are one of four complete sets of Degas' bronzes in the world.

This set comes from the Museu de Arte in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and has traveled to San Diego, Phoenix, San Francisco, and now Boise.

Other sets exist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

The group includes Degas' most famous and the only one he displayed himself, the "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen." Another edition of that sculpture sold at auction for \$11.8 million in 2003.

Degas was one of the most prominent and influential painters of the French Impressionism movement in the 1870s through the 1890s. The mainstream art world at the time railed against him and his compatriots such as Edouard Manet, Paul Emile Pissarro, Claude Monet and Mary Cassatt.

The Impressionist style captured a momentary glimpse of a subject, usually something ordinary and everyday such as gardens or average people, not considered suitable subjects for art at the time. They also focused on light play that offered an impression of a subject rather than a literal copy of it. This gave the work a wild, extremely colorful style that contrasted sharply with the government-sanctioned art of the day.

Although his work may look spontaneous, it was the result of careful study and work, as the artist wrote: "No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament ... I know nothing." Degas also angered the art world because he painted dancers, who were largely thought to be prostitutes. And many were. The "Little Dancer" blends bronze with tulle, ribbon and doll's hair. When it was shown at the Sixth Impressionists Show in 1881, it was labeled "vulgar" by the critics.

That was the only time Degas showed a sculpture in public. Degas' close friends knew him as a talented sculptor. Pierre-Auguste Renoir called him "the greatest living sculptor" of the time.

But Degas mainly pursued sculpture as a movement study to make his paintings more lifelike. By training to work in three dimensions, his expression in two became more acute.

The artist neglected his wax originals and left them in a dusty corner of his cluttered studio. After his death in 1917 his family found them deteriorating and covered with dirt.

They carefully cleaned and repaired them and then cast them first in plaster and gel, to preserve the wax originals, and then made a bronze model. From that model they cast the four complete sets of 73 bronzes and others between 1919 and 1932 at the Hebrard Foundry in Paris. The extra step to preserve the wax, which live today at the Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles, makes the sculptures a bit controversial. Because they were sanctioned by the family they are considered by the majority of the art world to be Degas sculptures. There are a few dissenters who say that because the sculptures were not created by Degas himself they are fakes.

Many sculptors do not cast their own works in bronze but oversee the process. The difference with Degas' work is that he wasn't alive to supervise the details, says Malcolm Phinney, gallery director for Valley Foundry Gallery of Art in Joseph Ore., one of the oldest foundries in the area.

"Perhaps it's a little delicate," Phinney says. "There's no telling how they would be different if he had been around. They're not fakes. They're

just what they are. They are what he perceived in wax."

Many artists create art out of a need to make beauty in their own way and they don't think beyond that, Taye says.

Degas obviously didn't think about his discarded wax works beyond the moment. He never wanted them to be seen, yet here they are. "You wonder how he'd feel about having them cast. If he intended them to be seen, I think he would have taken better care of them and then had them cast himself," Taye says.

"But we all have benefited from seeing them. I hope he'd be happy that we enjoy them."

#### **Degas discussion**

Here's what some Boise sculptors have to say about Edgar Degas:

- "They're less refined than the sculpture that preceded him. You can see he was not interested in the details of fingers and features. He was interested in the expression of the body."

— John Taye, Boise State University art professor, sculptor and painter.

- "He totally offended the art world at the time, and now his work is considered one of our greatest treasures in the world. He's very inspirational. He really encouraged those who followed him to not be afraid to break from tradition. He wasn't afraid to leave his fingerprints and be true to his own style. As a result he was able to communicate with a whole new level of truth."

— Irene Deely, sculptor and owner of Woman of Steel gallery

- "I can only speak from my specialty, which is equine sculpture. The way he got the underlying structure just right, even though he was working in this very loose style, is amazing. The sense of movement — his horses are never static. They're just being their horsey selves. He's able to capture the whole expression and emotion of the horse in that moment."

— Lynn Fraley, equine sculptor and owner of Laf'n Bear Studio