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Degas' dancers have stories to tell

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Perhaps you've seen her.

A ribbon tied loosely around her braid. Shoulders back, arms taut and fingers tightly interlaced behind her. Lanky legs, knobby knees. Tired, lilted eyes. Tattered gauze tutu. And chin lifted in irresolute defiance.

Edgar Degas' "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is one of the most recognizable works of modern art in the world. Looking at her, some will see a teenager who, though a little awkward, has a quiet beauty and authenticity. Others envisage an ugly, depraved street urchin.

For more than a century, her figure has been scrutinized, unleashing vicious debates over issues of female beauty and sexuality. She was center stage, too, for part of an artistic revolution.

A chance to see her, as the centerpiece of the "Degas Sculptures" exhibit opening this week at the Milwaukee Art Museum, may not settle the debate, but it certainly may draw you in.

As part of the ongoing wrangling over the girl's identity, and what she represents, art historians in more recent years have begun to ask: Who was *she*?

A girl by the name of Marie Van Goethem was the real "little dancer," a frequent model for the French painter and occasional sculptor.

Her story, as it has come together, is fragmented and quite grim.

Born poor in Paris

Marie Genevieve Van Goethem was born June 7, 1865, to Belgian parents, a father who was a tailor and a mother who had no profession. The girl was given the name of her dead sister, who died after 18 days of life the prior year.

The Van Goethems settled in Paris, a place then quickened by a new sense of the modern, straddling its pre-industrial and post-industrial self.

The onset of modernism brought with it a new popular culture, too. Bustling streets, sidewalk cafes, singers and dancers, enticing shops - these were all signs of a new pace of life, a new hunger for pleasure and entertainment.

The family lived in Paris' 9th Arrondissement, a diverse stew of wealthy and poor, day laborers and prostitutes, brothels and merchants. The Breda district where Marie was born was one of the most squalid pockets.

Marie became a student at the Paris Opera dance school and later performed in opera house ballet performances. Her two sisters, Antoinette and Charlotte, were also dancers.

At some point when the girls were still young, Mr. Van Goethem died, leaving his wife and daughters to fend for themselves. Mrs. Van Goethem became a laundress, a common job for dancers' mothers.

The widow Van Goethem and her girls moved into a seven-story stone building facing the street, not far from Degas' studio. It had "one dark staircase," two shops at street level, a paint shop, a beer seller, an innkeeper, a hairdresser and laundresses, describes Martine Kahane in her essay in the show's exhibition catalog.

A fictional laundress in Emile Zola's novel "The Dram Shop" describes with precision the non-fictional world within

Bronzed Beauty



Photo/MAM

Edgar Degas' "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is one of the world's most recognizable works of modern art. Degas premiered the sculpture in Paris in 1881.



Photo/MAM

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a world of impoverished Parisians of that time: "But mixed up with the lofty brand-new buildings there were still plenty of rickety old houses; between facades of carved masonry yawned black holes, gaping kennels exposing their wretched windows. Coming up through the rising tide of luxury the destitution of the slums thrust itself into view."

Dance as a fine art had fallen to the realm of mild musical entertainments that attracted large, less discriminating crowds. Dancers were paid modest wages, and a little extra per-performance money. It was generally more than other child laborers earned.

Degas and the dancers

Degas frequented the ballet performances at the Paris Opera House, where Marie danced roles of extras such as peasants and slaves. He often slipped backstage with other prominent figures of the day.

His relationships with women are largely unknown. Degas' mother died when he was 13, he never married and no one can say whether he had mistresses or not.

Each of the trio of girls modeled for Degas, as did a host of others. The artist created some of the first behind-the-scenes images of dancers, by far his favorite subject.

Since the 1870s, Degas had been investigating the mechanics of human motion, which some say caused a psychological distance from his subjects, both in the studio and in his art. He dictated positions to the dancers who, for four hours of holding a pose, would probably be paid between 6 and 10 francs (a pound of meat cost a franc or two).

He did not work quickly, unlike many of his Impressionist contemporaries, and demanded a great deal of time and perseverance from his models. At some point, the police came around, asking questions about the frequent comings and goings of the young girls.

Degas attended the ballet's auditions and competitions, with, some say, a paternal interest, advocating for one dancer or another.

'Little Dancer' exhibit

The 47-year-old Degas premiered his "Little Dancer" at the sixth annual exhibition of Impressionist art in 1881, after working on her since the late 1870s. The sculpture was placed in the show a little late, presumably because Degas continued to fuss over it. He already had promised it would appear the year before at the fifth exhibition, but it didn't.

"Petite Danseuse de quatorze ans," the sculpture's original French name, was fashioned from tinted and fragile wax, a horse hair wig, a green satin hair ribbon, a gauze tutu, a silk bodice and pink ballet slippers.

The statuette possesses a tension between unforgiving realism and knowing authenticity. The dancer's hard work and the cost to her body are present in her muscular form and her stance. She is an individual, tired and tense, not a type.

In the art of the time, dancers were often romanticized and placed in mythological contexts. Even Auguste Renoir, a contemporary, created scenes in his paintings of social convention, with smiling and flirtatious women that by today's standards look more like decoration than real women.

Degas' choice of medium for "Little Dancer" was important in the Baroque but considered amateurish and "unartistic" by the 19th century, a technique familiar to campy wax museum figures.

Some critics were fierce in their disdain. The gangly girl was ugly, frightening, they said then.

Degas never exhibited sculpture again.

Endings not known

Young Marie became known as Degas' model. The local newspapers, which included a line or two about each dancer when there was a performance, described just Marie as an "artist's model" for a time.

Marie and her sister Antoinette were also noted in the papers for frequenting the Martyrs Tavern and the Rat Mort, both frequented by Degas and known hangouts for young and available women.

Degas' 'Grande Arabesque, Third Time' will also be on display.



Photo/Int'l Arts
Memphis

Edgar Degas' "Spanish Dance," modeled in 1883-'85, is part of a collection at the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo in Brazil.

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The girls had become prostitutes. The lower- and middle-class women who took up the sex trade were both reviled and desired in a way that's partly unfamiliar today.

Fear that their vulgarities would infiltrate the new modern culture was common. Still, they were also among the most independent, and sometimes educated, women of their time. For a few, prostitution was a way to climb up the social ladder.

For the van Goethem girls, though, it was not.

Antoinette was thrown in jail for trying to steal 700 francs from one of her gents and seems to disappear from all record after that. Marie was arrested, too, for trying to pickpocket one of her customers.

Marie was eventually sacked, dismissed from the opera ballet. Dancers were usually fired for things such as performance mistakes, absences and tardiness.

After that, nothing is known about Marie. That her fate was cast into oblivion only accentuates the debate over the meaning of "Little Dancer."

The end to Marie's story might have affirmed one point of view or another, but we don't know whether she married, had children or even grew to old age. No record has been found.

Treatment of women

Today Degas is called both a misogynist and a pioneering feminist.

Did the artist present an authentic and intimate view of women's lives, sympathetic to the cruelties they suffered? Or, did he regard women as depraved and lesser beings who were also desired and fodder for the fantasies of men?

Some say the popular appeal of Impressionist artists has blinded us from valid criticisms of Degas. He was not motivated by a desire to understand, they say. Rather, he was dominated by a "ruthless curiosity of a bourgeois gone slumming," writes Bram Dijkstra in "Idols of Perversity," a book about the iconography of female stereotypes in the 19th century.

A work like "Repose," a monotype in black ink on china paper, buttresses the point, Dijkstra writes. In it, three faceless prostitutes lie in carnal repose, scratching and stretching between customers. (Picasso owned these monotypes, which partly inspired the sexual immediacy in his brothel scene, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.")

Some, though, believe Degas was capable of dignifying women. He plucked them from the realm of bourgeois fantasy and rooted them in their true social realities, art historians in this other camp attest. Women in many of Degas' rehearsal halls scenes, for example, bear expressions of self-possessed absorption, they argue.

"The paradox, of course, is that Degas created some of the most appealing, believable and intelligent-looking women in all of art," wrote Deborah Solomon in a 1998 New York Times article.

The truth probably lies somewhere between the extreme arguments. Consciously and unconsciously, the artist probably both upheld prevailing prejudices while also subverting them.

To this day, the little dancer's body elicits strong reactions. The sculpture is recognized as modern today, allowing a subtler appreciation for its beauty. But many still describe her face and limbs as less than pretty, to say the least.

It's that ambiguity and tension that make much of Degas work so intriguing to contemporary audiences.

During his own life, at a time when feminism was gaining a foothold in the world, Degas continued to rework "Little Dancer," which remained in his studio to the end of his life. He refused to part with it when potential buyers came along over the years, and some historians report he, only half jokingly, called her his "daughter."

Reproductions

The Milwaukee Art Museum exhibit, which includes 73 bronze sculptures and 20 paintings, drawings and pastels, is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the name "Degas" has never hung from a banner here, no Impressionist artist has been the subject of a large show. That is reason enough to relish the opportunity.

On the other hand, it's important to recognize the show's sculptures are posthumous reproductions.

After his death in 1917, Degas' heirs gave permission to have the mostly wax sculptures left in his studio cast in bronze. To do this, Paul-Albert Batholome, a sculptor and longtime friend of Degas, prepared the sculptures for casting by a Paris foundry.

This show is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski and circulated by International Arts of Memphis, Tenn. The complete set of sculptures comes from the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo in Brazil.

It is unclear whether Degas ever intended these sculptures to be shown or cast in bronze. The Milwaukee Art Museum, though, has fashioned for this show what no other venue has thus far: an appropriate context.

The curator of earlier European art, Laurie Winters, has planned a re-creation of Degas' studio as well as lectures and documentaries. Her challenge and hope is to make as clear as possible the working methods and intentions of an artist not known for his clarity.

Research sources for this article include "Degas Sculptures," by Joseph S. Czestochowski and Anne Pingeot; "Idols of Perversity," by Bram Dijkstra; "Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life," by Eunice Lipton; "The Expanding Discourse" by Norma Broude; "In a Solo Turn, a Tempest Over a Famed Tutu," by Deborah Solomon, The New York Times, May 18, 1998; and "19th Century Art," by Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson.

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Degas Sculptures

WHEN

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