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Degas' main medium was inspiration

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On Art



James Auer
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When it comes to speaking about Edgar Degas, the pioneering French impressionist whose sculptures will be shown in February at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Ann Dumas is at the top of the scholarly heap.

A freelance art historian based in London, she holds multiple degrees from the University of London and has guest curated Degas shows in New York and London. She found time for a question-and-answer session during a visit to Milwaukee.

Q. How did you first become interested in Degas?

A. My interest in Degas and other French artists of his era dates back to the time when I was an undergraduate, working toward a degree in French literature. As part of my studies I read (poet Charles) Beaudelaire and other French authors of the 19th century. Through reading them, I became interested in the painting of the period.

Q. What is it about Degas' work that continues to hold your interest?

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A. I think it's the richness and variety of his thought and output. He was pushing the boundaries all the time with different media, never accepting things as they were, always picking things up and looking at them fresh, much as Picasso did. I also think he's an absolutely

wonderful draftsman, on a par with the Old Masters.

Edgar Degas



To create a realistic-looking "Horse Galloping on Right Foot," the innovative Edgar Degas turned to the photography of Eadweard Muybridge.

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Q. How long did Degas' active career last?

A. It started in 1854 or 1855 and ended in 1912. So it lasted 50 years or so.

Q. Do you see him as a traditionalist or an innovator or a mixture of both?

A. What makes Degas great is that he's a real mixture of both at a very deep level. He was very avant-garde, extremely innovative for his time, the most innovative of the 19th century. But he was also extremely well-educated and had an incredible respect for artists of the past.

Q. What do you see as his greatest strength?

A. His greatest strength was his ability to capture absolutely the essential thing, the essence about a movement, a pose or a gesture.

Q. Are there any mysteries about Degas' life that remain unsolved?

A. On the most personal level, yes. He's an enigmatic figure. His personal life always remained shrouded in mystery. He never married and he's not known to have had any physical or emotional relationships with anybody. Still, he had a great sensitivity to people and an understanding of human nature.

Q. Why did he show so few of his sculptures during his lifetime?

A. For Degas, the sculptures were private and experimental. They were a way of working out problems. In an interview he made a nice connection with (novelist Charles) Dickens, saying that when Dickens got bogged down, he'd get stick figures of his characters and make them talk. I think that for him turning two-dimensional images into three-dimensional figures was a way of pulling out the essence of the character.

Q. Why do you suppose he was so interested in dancers and horses?

A. His primary interest as an artist was in movement, pose and gesture. It was this that made him concentrate so much on race horses and ballet dancers.

Q. How does his work as a sculptor relate to his better-known paintings?

A. Sculpture was a way for him of working out movement and gesture in three dimensions. Sometimes sculptures were made before the painting, sometimes after. Sometimes it was all going on simultaneously, with Degas moving back and forth from one medium to another.

Q. Did he use Eadweard Muybridge's photographs as a guide in making his paintings and sculptures?

A. Yes, he is believed to have seen several of Muybridge's stop-action photographs when they were published in a French magazine in 1878. In his horse paintings, done in 1878 and 1879, Degas starts to depict horses' galloping and movement the way they are depicted in Muybridge's photographs. Before that, artists were not aware of the exact way a horse moved through the air.



He made many sculptures but the "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" was the only one exhibited during his lifetime.

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Q. What's your feeling about charges that bronze casts of Degas' sculptures are fraudulent since they were done from wax or clay originals after his death?

A. This is an issue that comes up all the time with Degas, and, of course, there is a point: He did not physically supervise the castings. Unlike Rodin, Matisse or Picasso, he was dead when the work was cast. But Degas made conflicting comments. He once said he didn't want things cast in bronze, it was too permanent. On the other hand, there's evidence he did approach a bronze caster at one time. And he did have three of them done in plaster, so he was thinking at some time of a form more permanent than wax.

Q. So you think the bronzes are authentic?

A. I think Degas' heirs and the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel were extremely responsible about the castings. They went to a top-level caster, a very skilled Italian foundry, and to immense trouble to stay as close as he possibly could to Degas' waxes, to duplicating it right down to finger marks in the wax. I think it was done to a very high standard with great respect for Degas' artistic integrity even if it was posthumous. And if it hadn't been done, that whole side of Degas' work would have been lost to us.

Q. Why do you suppose Degas used actual fabric in his sculptural depiction of the "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen"?

A. Degas was a realist or naturalist, rather like Zola or Dickens. The term "impressionist" only partially fits. He was trying to cut through convention. In the late 19th century, when he was working, a lot of western painting had become extremely moribund. Salon pictures of that era were pretty deadly. Degas wanted to make the figure very lifelike. In order to do that, he had to use real materials.

Q. Late in life, Degas sold his drawings but hoarded his tiny sculptures of wax and clay. Why was that?

A. I think he had never presented the sculptures as works for sale. The "Little Dancer" was the only piece of sculpture he had exhibited in his lifetime. It did not sell. Later Mrs. Havemeyer and the dealer Ruel wanted to buy it, and he didn't sell. So I think he always thought of sculpture as something private, experimental, to do with his private making of art, not to display in exhibition or sell.

Q. He was inactive during the last few years of his life? Why?

A. He lost his eyesight. He was never totally blind, but his sight deteriorated badly and he wasn't able to work.

Q. Even so, he kept some of his work off the market?

A. Oh, yes. He kept huge amounts of his own work in his studio. Starting in the 1890s, he recycled images from his earlier work. Sculpture formed a kind of archive of his image bank. When he died, people were astonished at the amount of work that had piled up in his studio over 40 years. Huge sales were held in Paris in 1918 and 1919.

Q. What would you say is Degas' legacy?

A. He has a quality that actually is true of all very great artists: He completely transcends his time. On one hand (his paintings and sculptures) are coming out of late-19th century Paris. On the other hand they're completely timeless. He had such amazing visual acuity that he could see things that absolutely encapsulate the essence of a visual phenomenon. It can still pull you up short when you see one of his great works.