

DEGAS SCULPTURES

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FIG. 1.
Edgar Degas, *Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot*, c.1890–1900, dark green wax and cork, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon Collection, 1999.80.5



Edgar Degas, *Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot*, c. 1900–1903, plaster, Courtesy of Lefevre Gallery, London, Private Collection



Gauthier, *Edgar Degas, Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Degas's Sculptures Re-examined: The Marketing of a Private Pursuit

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RECOGNIZED as one of the most important artists of the nineteenth century, Degas is extremely popular with the general public. Renoir, his contemporary, called him “the greatest living sculptor.”¹ He was one of the most accomplished and influential sculptors of his age, which may explain why scholars continue to speculate about when and how his sculptures were made, and their place within the context of his times.

During his lifetime, Degas exhibited only one piece of sculpture. In 1881, his masterpiece *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* (cat. 73) was shown in the sixth exhibition of impressionist art in Paris. This piece was to have been exhibited the previous year in the fifth exhibition; instead Degas presented only an empty case, perhaps simply because the sculpture was not ready. Conceptually and technically revolutionary in its stark naturalism—he used clothing and doll’s hair—*Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* greatly surprised viewers and critics alike, resulting in frequent public comments of “vulgar” and “low,” as well as the inevitable comparisons to the very popular waxworks at Madame Tussaud’s Museum in London and the Musée Grévin in Paris.² One observer commented, “The terrible realism of this statuette makes the public distinctly uneasy, all its ideas about sculpture, about cold lifeless whiteness, about those memorable formulas copied again and again for centuries are demolished.”³ The artist—until the end of his working life in about 1912—vigorously continued to make sculptures, but, perhaps because of the reception of the *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, he did not again publicly exhibit another piece of sculpture. For Degas, sculpture became a private pursuit.

Degas was by no means a recluse. On the contrary, he was very aware of contemporary artists as well as of complex casting methods and other techniques. As both Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) noted, Degas constantly sought

technical innovations in his work; embracing either unconventional procedures or new combinations of traditional techniques. Many people visited Degas and commented on the numerous sculptures in his studio and on his obsession with making sculpture.⁴ It is apparent that he derived tremendous pleasure from these sculptures and the physical process of making them. We still know little of Degas’s motivation in making his sculptures, but they do appear to be conceptually unique works of art and an extension of his drawing. Some sculptures he preserved in glass cases and his collections of both his work and that of other artists “constituted a working archive from which new works could be generated.”⁵ Many of his sculptures have not survived, a result of the extreme fragility of his mixed media (a combination of pigmented wax with a nondrying modeling clay called plastilene that he usually applied over a wire armature with fillers of cork, rope, sticks, or similar found objects in his studio), neglect, or simply because they were failed experiments; all situations described by the artist himself.⁶

Degas’s obsession with making sculpture was matched only by his insatiable technical experimentation and reworking of compositions, his feeling that they were never complete. Between 1900 and 1903, perhaps at the instigation of his close friends, he cast three wax sculptures in plaster—*Woman Rubbing Her Back with Sponge* (cat. 28), *Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot* (cat. 40), and *Spanish Dance* (cat. 45).⁷ This casting may have occurred after his good friend and sculptor Albert Bartholomé (1848–1928) introduced him to the foundry owner Adrien-A. Hébrard (1865–1937) and perhaps the Milanese caster Albino Palazzolo (1883–1973). Hébrard and Palazzolo had worked together from the early 1900s and were well known in Parisian artistic circles.⁸ As early as 1904 Rodin turned to Hébrard to cast the first large bronze of his