Carved in space

Though cast in bronze, Degas' sculptures appear frozen in motion

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

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Impressionism fashioned light itself into a prime subject of paintings and drawings. Edgar Degas will forever be seen as a contributor to that "ism," and not without reason.

Like Manet, Monet and others, he depicted modern life in ways it hadn't been seen before in art. And like them, he was dissatisfied with academic ways of thinking about art, even though he was deeply reverential of art history. Degas also participated in most impressionist exhibitions. But he preferred to be called a realist or naturalist, because he was fascinated primarily with gesture and motion, whether the subject was human or horse.

Sculpture was never his primary medium. Mary Cassatt, the most famous American impressionist, is often quoted on his bronzes, because she declared: "I believe he will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter." Take one look at a great oil or pastel and you just know she was dead wrong.

Looking at the 73 bronzes of "Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures," however, it quickly becomes clear that most of these works presented him with a valuable way of thinking, of sketching in three dimensions, about subjects he realized more richly in oils, pastels and charcoal. He rendered the figure in ways that no one else envisioned. His sculptures are an absorbing set of signs on the path he charted.

The exhibition, curated by Ann Dumas for the Memphis-based International Arts organization, gets an elegant installation at the San Diego Museum of Art. The lighting is dramatic but not distracting. The design, overseen by Steven Kern, the SDMA's curator of European art, feels carefully constructed to reveal Degas' abiding interest in the repeated form.

The icon among these works truly deserves to be one: "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen." It is a magnetic work, with its self-absorbed figure, standing approximately 40 inches tall, and its arresting combination of frozen form and real clothing. His model wasn't beautiful in a conventional way, but the work itself is.

By the time he exhibited this work in 1881, the 47-year-old Degas was long known in Paris as a devotee of ballet and a painter of dancers. Still, some commentators were repulsed by the sculpture. "A flower of the gutter" one critic sneered. And apparently enough reviewers disapproved for Degas to be persuaded that further public exposure for his sculptures was unwise.

He only made them for private use thereafter and these objects in wax, plastilene (a variety of clay), cloth and plaster were simply scattered about his studio when he died in 1917. Degas never saw them in bronze. He once expressed the wish to have some cast, but never acted on it. We can speculate all we want about whether he would have been moved or horrified by the decision of his heirs to have them cast by the widely respected Parisian foundry of Adrien Hébrard. But no clear answer emerges. Nor is it absolutely clear what sort of restoration or conservation was performed on them before they were made in bronze between 1919 and 1937.

What we can say, with certainty, is that the bronzes seem true to Degas' obsession with ballet dancers and they are also true to his intense desire to evoke motion. Three of the influential motion studies from the 1880s by photographer Eadweard Muybridge are on view, among works supplementing the bronzes, and they neatly make the point that this sort of knowledge was a new frontier in visual thinking in the late 19th century. Degas, who made photographs himself, was greatly interested.

The exhibition, as installed in San Diego, accentuates that quality of movement arrested, with ensembles of like figures positioned within a single case. One group seems as if they are doing arabesques in unison. In another case, the women each lift a front leg, for "fourth position front." A trio stands with hands on hips, during a moment of rest. A couple of them are in the midst of a Spanish dance. The seated figures, mostly women in the act of bathing, get their own area within the exhibition; their poses suggest motion too, though obviously of a more intimate kind.

For all of the sensuous formal beauty in Degas' better-known pastels and paintings – the lush color, the sure line and the great attention to the gesture of the body – Degas was the realist he claimed to be. More often than he presents dancers in performance, he shows them laboring hard in rehearsal and in moments of weary repose.

"Waiting," the great pastel co-owned by the Getty and Norton Simon museums, pictures a seated dancer, rubbing what must be an aching ankle. Seated next to her is a somber-faced escort (mother? guardian? teacher?) in dark clothes. No glamour there.

But neither is Degas cruelly realistic, as some commentators have asserted. He identifies with his subjects to a great degree. British critic

Andrew Graham-Dixon perceptively wrote, "He seems infinitely sympathetic, finding in their predicament an emblem of his own."

It's well known that most of the ballet dancers at the Paris Opéra, where Degas spent a lot of time beginning in the 1860s, didn't have glamorous childhoods. Marie von Goethem, the model for beloved "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" came from a family of little means. After a brief, generally uneventful career in dance, she had to help make ends meet through prostitution.

The dignified aura this subject projects seems all the more poignant when we know her later biography. To see the "Little Dancer" sculpture along with the "Study in the Nude for Dressed Dancer" is startling. Clothed, she looks elegant. Nude, she is gaunt, her pose more awkward than anyone would suppose when viewing her in costume. This is another dimension of Degas' realism: Artistic appearance masks an uglier reality.

At the same time, most of these sculptures introduce abstraction in a way that his pictures don't. No wonder "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen" is an icon and these others works are more obscure. Her form evokes a person. The rest are clearly studies. They are faceless because the interest here is to know how to represent the body more convincingly, more naturalistically.

Even in a drawing, Degas could make a body look carved in space. And you needn't go elsewhere to make this comparison of work in three and two dimensions; Kern has supplemented the bronzes with some strong Degas images, including a wonderful charcoal drawing from the Kimbell Art Museum, "After the Bath, Woman Drying Her Hair" (circa 1895).

The small versions of horses are riveting. The musculature and the frozen motion is completely convincing. No human figure in bronze is as magnetic as "Little Dancer," but a couple of others come close. "The Tub" encircles a reclining woman. It's as if she is framed by the shallow basin, with a sweep of wet hair dangling over its lip. "Woman Resting Head on One Hand," is a tiny bust. The subject appears lost in a daydream. She is so vividly modeled that you feel as if her eyes will open any second and she'll tell you what's on her mind.

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art review

"Degas in Bronze:

The Complete Sculptures"

Through Sept. 28

San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park

$8; $6, seniors, students, military, young adults (18-24); $3, children 6-17