

## Art of the dance

*By Lee Roberts*

MILWAUKEE - A look inside the artistic process. That's what visitors to the Milwaukee Art Museum have the opportunity to experience as they make their way through the "Degas Sculptures" exhibit currently on display there.

At first glance, this exhibition - with its glass-enclosed sculptures and two-dimensional art hanging on gallery walls - may seem like standard museum fare. But closer inspection allows the viewer to look beyond the art and learn about the artist's use of sculpture as a three-dimensional sketchbook of sorts; his study of movement in both human and animal forms; and the process of wax sculpture casting.

There is even one gallery where visitors can try their own hand (or feet) at capturing images of movement on paper or by performing that movement themselves. It is all part of this special exhibit created as a collaborative effort by the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Milwaukee Ballet Company.

People of Paris The main focus of "Degas Sculptures" are the 73 three-dimensional pieces created by the French Impressionist master, Edgar Degas, who is best known for his paintings of ballet dancers and early Parisian life.

"Degas was really on the fringes of the Impressionist movement," said Laurie Winters, curator of the exhibit and MAM curator of earlier European art. "He was really much more of a realist than some of the other Impressionist painters, whose key interests were landscapes and sunlit fields with dappled light."

Instead, Degas liked to paint Parisians at the racetrack or the ballet, or sitting in the coffee houses, she said. And his sculpture was his method for studying how the people (or animals in the case of the racetrack) of those times moved.

"He showed us what it was like to live in Paris then," Winters said.

The collection of sculpted women and horses in the MAM exhibit comes from the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, in Brazil, and is one of only four complete sets of the artist's bronzes in existence. The MAM is the only Midwest venue for the "Degas Sculptures" exhibit.

Early realism In addition to their beauty and grace, something that makes these sculptures worth seeing is the fact that all but one were never shown during the artist's lifetime. While Degas used sculpture as a form of artistic expression throughout his life (1834-1917), the only sculpture he ever exhibited was "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," a provocative and groundbreaking multi-media piece that was shown at the sixth exhibition of Impressionist art in Paris in 1881.

Critics at the time condemned what they saw as harsh realism and unconventional mixing of media in "Little Dancer" so loudly that they discouraged Degas from ever exhibiting his sculpture again, according to Winters. The artist continued to sculpt as he studied body forms and movement throughout his career, but only his paintings were exhibited. His sculptural work was known only to his friends and fellow artists.

Upon his death, more than 150 sculptures were found in Degas' studio. Some of those works, most of which were made of clay and wax (with wire skeletons) had become fragile, and the artist's heirs decided to authorize a series of bronze casts to be made from 73 of the small figurines. Those bronze castings are what are on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Dance as art Today, "Little Dancer" is considered an icon of 19th Century art and is the centerpiece of the MAM exhibit. It is also the inspiration for an original ballet, choreographed by Milwaukee Ballet artistic director Michael Pink, in conjunction with this exhibit. Pink's piece was debuted during the Milwaukee Ballet's February performance at the Pabst Theater.

Pink and the ballet company have also worked with the museum in creating special educational programs related to the "Degas Sculptures" exhibit for both school children and the general public. One such program takes place in the

galleries on certain weekends during the exhibit's run. It involves dancers from the Milwaukee Ballet II company, who practice and perform in a re-creation of a 19th Century Parisian dance studio.

Visitors of all ages are not only invited to watch and sketch the dancers in the studio, but to put on tutus (provided in the studio) and get out on the dance floor themselves. Upcoming Degas dance studio hours (when Milwaukee Ballet II dancers will be present) are 1 to 3 p.m. April 10 and 17 and 4 to 6 p.m. May 26. For more information, visit the Web at <http://www.mam.org> or <http://www.milwaukeeballet.org> Such collaboration among arts organizations is something Pink said he and the rest of the ballet company feel is an important part of connecting with the community.

"It is all part of sharing the wealth of creativity," he said. "This was a gift for us to be able to bring this to life. It is a really exciting time for us."

The artistic process Before reaching the dance studio gallery, visitors make their way through several galleries filled with sculptures of horses, dancers and bathers. Interspersed with the sculptures are approximately 20 two-dimensional works (drawings, paintings and pastels) that show how closely Degas' sculptural work was related to the depiction of form and movement in his paintings. Some of the pieces are on loan from other museums and galleries from around the world.

There is also a display designed to provide a view of what Degas' work space might have been like. Here the lost process of wax casting is explained through objects and techniques specific to Degas' time, as well as a video presentation. The exhibit also features a timeline of Degas' life and work.

Audio tours of "Degas Sculptures" are available, and some of the audio stops offer the option of hearing the narrative in French. This show, which continues through early June, is the first time the MAM has presented an exhibition of French Impressionist works, said David Gordon, MAM director.

**WHAT:** "Degas Sculptures," an exhibit of bronze sculptures by Edgar Degas

**WHERE:** Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Drive, Milwaukee.

**WHEN:** Now through June 5. The Milwaukee Art Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Wednesday and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday.

**COST:** Tickets to "Degas Sculptures" cost \$12 adults, \$10 seniors and \$8 students. Children under 12 are admitted free. Ticket prices include admission to the museum. Group discounts are available. Guests wearing a tutu can enter the exhibit free on Tutu Tuesdays throughout the run of the exhibit.

**INFO:** Call (414) 224-3200 or visit <http://www.mam.org>