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Show brings to light Degas' enigmatic wax casts

By KARYN BONFIGLIO
Get Out

Edgar Degas never intended the public to see his sculptures.

In the summer of 1897, he told journalist Francois Thiebault-Sisson, "Since nobody will ever see these models, it will never occur to anybody to speak of them, not even you. Between now and the day I die, all of it will disintegrate of its own accord, and as far as my reputation is concerned, that is probably just as well."

True to his word, for 20 years Degas' sculptures remained hidden away in his studio. After his death in 1917, 150 wax sculptures and fragments were found. Most, as Degas predicted, had deteriorated beyond repair. Only 73 pieces could be restored and cast in bronze.

Today, just four complete sets of those bronzes exist. One, on loan from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil, is on display through May 30 at the Phoenix Art Museum's Steele Gallery.

Degas, an Impressionist artist remembered for painting ballet dancers, horse races and bathing women, used sculpture as a sketching tool. He called his three-dimensional works "warm-up exercises, preliminary documents, nothing more."

Through sculpture, Degas tried to capture motion in space. He sacrificed detail — concentrating on the angle of a head, rather than the expression of a face.

Standing among the pieces in "Degas in Bronze" is like being whisked back in time to the artist's studio. Get up close to the works — most of which are under a foot in height — and you can see pieces of Degas that he left behind: The rough textures, as though he had just lifted his fingers from the modeling wax, a fingerprint, or the mark of a tool in a lock of twisting hair.

Arranged by theme, The Phoenix Art Museum exhibit takes viewers through the stages of Degas' experimentation — from women bathers to horses to the dancers that made up more than three-quarters of Degas' body of work. All lead to "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," cast from the only sculpture Degas ever exhibited.

The piece, of a haughty, young dancer with long, gangly limbs and oversized hands clasped behind her back, was a radical departure from the established styles of the day. Originally exhibited in wax, with a painted face and dressed in a real gown, "Little Dancer," which Degas worked on for two years, became one of the most important sculptures in 19th century French art. It, along with the other 72 works modeled more than a century ago, offers a rare glimpse into the mind of one of the first modern sculptors.

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