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Is she the 'real' thing?

The Degas bronzes sell for many millions of dollars each, but for art historians, their story is fraught with controversy, JAMES ADAMS writes

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Fifty years ago, an exhibition of bronze sculptures credited to the French Impressionist master Edgar Degas would have been cause for excitement, mild or otherwise, but not controversy.

After all, the famous (and popular) bronzes, of dancers, bathers, horses and jockeys were regarded uncomplicatedly by museums and the public as the gateway to Degas's sculptural oeuvre, and by art scholars as the touchstone for their ruminations on Degas's three-dimensional work. In fact, for some art collectors, the bronzes remain the main event, with individual pieces in recent years fetching as much as \$17-million.

Now, however, thanks to significant advances in art scholarship and some stunning revelations, a major display of Degas bronzes often is less a cause for polite celebration and more an opportunity to debate such heavy-duty art-world issues as authenticity, intentionality, integrity and the role of the marketplace.

So it will be next weekend when the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto presents 76 bronzes credited to Degas -- three from its own permanent collection, 73 from Copenhagen's Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek -- as its centrepiece exhibition for the fall-winter season.

The Carlsberg artifacts, acquired in 1949 by the famous brewery's foundation, are reportedly one of only four known, more-or-less complete sets of the 73 Degas bronzes cast after his death. (The others are in museums in Paris, New York and Sao Paulo. There are, it turns out, 74 bronzes, *Schoolgirl* -- not in the AGO show --having been cast in 1956 or sometime thereafter.) Their unveiling in Canada, from next Saturday through Jan. 4, marks the first time

these bronzes have been permitted to leave their Danish home.

At various times in the last 80 or so years, the number of bronze sculptures in the world credited to Degas has been estimated to be as many as 2,000 and as "few" as 1,300. Richard Kendall, the U.S. Impressionist scholar, has noted that this relative ubiquity, "from Brazil to Copenhagen, from the banks of the Thames to the shores of the Pacific," sometimes leaves the casual observer with the impression that "every major institution and private collection has its obligatory Degas bronze." And there always seems to be a touring collection of them going from one city to the next.

The sheer presence and familiarity of the Degas bronzes -- most notably *Little Dancer, Aged 14* (a.k.a. *Ballet Dancer, Dressed*), with its beribboned, dark ash-blond hair, linen bodice and muslin tutu designed by Jeanne Fèvre, daughter of Degas's sister Marguerite -- has meant that the general public has "habitually" come to take them to be what Kendall terms "the real thing, with the same relationship to the artist's autograph work [his drawings, paintings] as casts supervised by Auguste Rodin or Henry Moore."

But the "reality is altogether more complex" and, as J. Carter Brown, the director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, wrote before his death last year, "very mysterious."

Above all, they are the Degas Degas never knew. None of the bronzes were made during the artist's lifetime (1834-1917). Although the artist made sculptures for 40 years, he showed only one of his three-dimensional pieces to the public during his life, and this was a work made primarily of beeswax, not bronze. Before his death, Degas, a lifelong bachelor, secretive and crotchety, left no instructions, written or verbal, that the 150 or so sculptures found in his studio -- all of them unsigned and made, variously, of coloured wax, clay, bits of cork, hair, cloth, wood, chalk, ceramic and found materials -- could or should be made into bronzes.

It remains a mystery why Degas never allowed his sculptures to be cast in bronze during his lifetime. Clearly he had had the opportunity and resources to do so. Indeed, around 1900, he permitted plaster casts to be made of three of his sculptures. Usually, plaster is one of the intermediate mediums used to take a sculpture to bronze from its original state (see sidebar), but for whatever reason Degas never authorized that elaborate translation.

After his death, friends and business associates of the artist recalled him pronouncing that he found bronze "too great a responsibility," that it is was a medium "for eternity." One reported him saying: "I modelled animals and people in wax for my own satisfaction, not to take a rest from painting or drawing, but to give more expression, more spirit and more life to my paintings and drawings. They are exercises to get me started."

"No one will ever see these efforts, no one should think of speaking about them," he reportedly said. "After my death all that will fall apart by itself, and that will be better for my reputation."

However, about eight months after his death, Degas's heirs -- a brother (who listed his job as

"investor"), two nieces (including one who was a Carmelite nun) and two nephews (one of whom was living in Uruguay) -- agreed that 73 of the mixed-media works found in sundry states of dusty decay in the artist's Paris studio should be given the bronze treatment by the André Hébrard foundry, and prepared in serialized editions using a complicated numbering and lettering system along with faux "Degas" signature stamps (but alas, no dates!).

Their motives, it's safe to say, were fuelled to a great degree by greed (what one Degas scholar politely calls "speculative interests") as well as by the desire to fix forever, in tin and copper, what most deemed to be the decidedly impermanent works Degas had fashioned in wax and clay. (It was agreed that 22 versions of each of the 73 figures would be rendered in bronze. However, it's since been determined that as few as 10 bronzes [of *Dancer at Rest*, *Hands on Hips*, *Left Leg Forward*] and as many as 29 [of *Little Dancer, Aged 14*] were made from each of the figures.) From the contemporary perspective, these arrangements seem highly arbitrary, disrespectful even. Yet the history of art in all idioms is littered with examples of relatives and associates of deceased artists ignoring the wishes of the dead to destroy this or that. And posterity often has sighed with relief as a result. This certainly was the view of the Degas bronzes in the decades immediately following his death.

Until, that is, 1955 when the first of what some call "the Three Big Shocks" to the "Degas sculpture system" was revealed. Prior to that year, the art world concentrated its attention (and money) on Degas's three-dimensional legacy in the serialized bronzes, presuming the waxes no longer existed. But in 1955, all but four of the 73 original wax works fashioned by Degas were found in the cellar of the Hébrard foundry, including *Little Dancer, Aged 14*, the only sculpture Degas had allowed to be shown publicly during his lifetime, when he was 46.

With this astonishing discovery, the orthodoxy of the bronzes being "the real thing" or even the "only thing" underwent a radical revision. Now, as the noted Degas scholar Patricia Failing, of the School of Art at the University of Washington, told The Globe and Mail recently, the bronzes could be viewed simply as "unauthorized posthumous casts," or, as she provocatively put it in an arts journal, "a death mask to its living subject." After being exhibited in New York and Richmond, Va., these originals were put on the market and bought en masse by the wealthy U.S. collector Paul Mellon. Almost 50 of them are now on permanent display at the sculpture centre of Washington's National Gallery of Art that opened in fall, 2002.

The second big shock occurred in 1976, when the Hébrard family announced it was putting up a "different" set of Degas bronzes for sale. These were, in fact, *modèles* -- a second set of master bronze casts that the Hébrards and their associates used from 1919 through, in all likelihood, the early 1970s(!) to make serialized casts (including perhaps the ones at the AGO), with all the attendant differences in size, detail, texture and colour that occurs when you make bronzes from other bronzes that have been, in turn, cast from wax. The Hébrard family never told Degas's heirs they had made this set. In fact, it was in clear violation of the 1918 contract (which states that the castings shall be "strictly limited" to 22 sets, with the foundry making and retaining *one* complete set, not two, "and after their execution, the parties shall be prohibited from having additional castings made"). This made scholars acutely aware that the Hébrards probably had never recorded or listed all the casts they had made over more than four decades.

As happened with the waxes and mixed-media works, another U.S. billionaire art collector, Norton

Simon, snapped up the *modèles*, installing them in his eponymous museum in Pasadena, Calif.

The third "blow" fell in 1991 with the first-ever complete publication of 72 multiple-view photographs, taken in 1917-1918, of 53 of the wax statuettes left in Degas's Paris apartment at the time of his death. These photographs, made at the behest of Degas's dealer, Joseph Durand-Ruel, were discovered in 1988 in the archives of Ambrose Vollard, a contemporary of Degas's and the dealer who presented the first one-man shows of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso.

The photographs are important not just as the earliest visual record of the statuettes but because they allowed scholars to make comparisons with the corresponding waxes bought by Mellon -- the waxes from which all the esteemed Degas museum bronzes derived.

As it turned out, the photographs showed that, in preparation for the casting into bronze, the Hébrard foundry allowed its senior caster, Albino Palazzolo, to make sundry alterations to Degas's handiwork, ostensibly to strengthen the waxes for the processes ahead. However, these alterations or repairs actually changed details of the waxes as they had been shaped by Degas's own hands. Furthermore, Palazzolo manipulated the waxes again in the mid-fifties, just before the Hébrard foundry announced it had the originals that it would eventually sell to Mellon.

Asked by an interviewer in 1955 if he could "recognize a false Degas bronze," Palazzolo, who was 72 at the time, answered with a smile that "he could, because he knew where to find his own fingerprints on the original."

With this, Failing, writing in a 1995 issue of *Apollo* magazine dedicated to Degas, declared that many of the Degas waxes now had to be viewed similarly to the many bronzes in the world, namely, "as collaborations [in this instance] between Degas and Palazzolo, assisted in some cases by Joseph Ternbach [a conservator with the National Gallery in Washington who handled the waxes after the Mellon purchase] and perhaps other minor players."

Intriguingly, what U.S. art historian Roger Crum has called the profound "art-historical implications of transforming Degas's original sculptures" -- original sculptures that, as Failing points out, didn't stay "original" for very long after Degas's death - "into an entirely different material" haven't had much effect on the bronzes' pre-eminence in the resale market or among art institutions. It's the bronzes that have pride of place (and receive the full-colour, full-page treatment) in the catalogue raisonné published last year. It's five bronzes of *Little Dancer, Aged 14* that have sold at auction in the last five years, each for more than \$13-million.

Market forces continue to drive both the perception and worth of Degas's sculptures. And this has been the case right from the beginning: Instead of sticking to the terms of the 1918 contract to make only 22 bronzes of each subject, the Hébrards made sure that over the years they produced more of the in-demand works (like *Little Dancer*) and fewer of the less popular (*The Bow*; *Pregnant Woman*).

If Degas bronzes continue to sell and enjoy approbation in spite of the many red flags that have been raised, it's because "the market has simply overwhelmed these caveats," says Failing. "Dealers note that the consciousness among collectors re: lifetime versus posthumous casts is very thin, and only a

few scholars are steadfast in their critiques of posthumous casting."

Judd Tully agrees. A former editor-at-large with Art and Auction magazine and an author who has written extensively on posthumous sculpture casts, Tully told The Globe and Mail: "Most scholars and aficionados don't quibble about their existence since the 'scandal' has been sanitized over time and people and institutions are keen on maintaining their investments." As Kirk Varnedoe, the head of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art, told Tully earlier this year before he died: "[Posthumous bronze casting] is the messiest subject alive. . . . If you decide once the heart [of an artist] beats for the last time, that's it, nothing ever produced after that is authentic, it makes your life much simpler."

The situation, however, is unlikely to get simpler. As fewer works by the great sculptors of the late 19th and 20th centuries find their way to market, "less sophisticated collectors with money to burn are less concerned about the posthumous-cast issue," notes Tully -- something that was driven home for him in September, 2002, when Christie's in Paris auctioned 24 bronzes by Alberto Giacometti for almost \$13-million.

All these casts had been made after Giacometti's death in 1966, some of them, more than a quarter-century afterwards. Like Degas, Giacometti had an aversion to bronze, but while he was alive he allowed some of his sculptures to be cast in that medium provided his brother Diego supervised their production. (Diego, who died in 1985, allowed a modest number of casts to be made after his brother's death, but after feuding with other members of the Giacometti estate in the early seventies, withdrew from that function.)

But what of institutions like MoMA, the National Gallery in London and, of course, the AGO, many of whom are signatories to a 1974 "statement on standards for sculptural reproduction and preventive measures to combat unethical casting in bronze"? Endorsed by the Association of Art Museum Directors, this statement rules that when an artist's work, originally cast in wood, wax, stone or other materials, is posthumously cast in bronze without any credible authorization from the artist, the resultant work should "be rejected as unethical," even if the heirs or executors approved the transfer from one medium to another. Furthermore, it declares as "inauthentic or counterfeit . . . all bronze casting from finished bronzes, all unauthorized enlargements, and all transfers into new material, unless specifically condoned by the artist."

Michael Parke-Taylor, the associate curator of European art at the AGO who is supervising the installation of the Carlsberg Degas exhibition, acknowledges that the existence and preservation of the Degas waxes places the discussion of the bronzes on a more challenging plane. With respect to the AGO, "it's a little problematic that we don't have the waxes, or some of the waxes, to be able to show the differences, to tell the full story." However, he added, "you're never going to see the National Gallery's waxes going on the road," and the handful he's seen in the Louvre "are oxidized quite badly; they're almost black relative to the bronzes."

That said, the AGO does plan to label the bronzes as "posthumous casts" and explain that Degas's preferred mediums were wax and clay. It also will show a video, on continuous loop on the lost-wax process. However, Parke-Taylor stressed that the show is focused very much on the "legitimacy" of the

73 bronzes as art objects in and of themselves, not on the physical processes that formed them or "the complex, fascinating historiography" that made them possible.

"We don't want to confuse the people, and it can get confusing to the public if you start talking about it too much. To explain the lost-wax technique to a layman, it's difficult. It really becomes academic after a while."

Parke-Taylor is pragmatic about the issues surrounding Degas's sculptures. "By casting them in bronze, they've been preserved for all time. The waxes are monumentally important, but how will they fare another 100 years from now? . . . If they hadn't been cast, what record would we have of his sculptures?"

He said the many editions of Degas bronzes "is like printmaking in many ways," with all the variations resulting from the execution of multiples. Andy Warhol, for instance, didn't necessarily make the actual prints that bear his name, noted Parke-Taylor, but he did provide his assistants with directions, material and subject matter. "So there is this split between conception and realization. . . . Sometimes this notion of authorship, of the hand moving on the work, can be a bit of a red herring."

(Critics of this view would, of course, argue that relative to Degas at least, Warhol, while alive, would have had the opportunity to review the work done by his assistants before agreeing [or not] that it met with his intentions and aesthetic and got his signature. Degas had been dead almost two years once the Hébrard foundry began taking his work into bronze.)

Failing remains pragmatic, too. True, she continues to believe the Degas waxes, not the bronzes, best exemplify the sensuality, warmth and whimsy that Degas intended to bring to his sculpture -- even though they were worked over, rebuilt and manipulated in the years after his death. But, "I think the field still bases many assumptions on the evidence of the bronzes, not the waxes." The National Gallery in Washington hopes to issue a catalogue on the waxes within the next two years, "and maybe this document will help shift the axis of analysis to some degree."

"But I don't expect too much change when collectors will pay \$11-million [U.S.] for an unauthorized bronze cast made from a plaster cast of the original wax, in an edition of unknown size, wearing a tutu designed after the artist's death by his niece."

Degas Sculptures runs at Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario from Oct. 11 to Jan. 4. Tickets are now on sale (416-979-6608).

The casting process

Taking a sculptor's original work in clay, wax, stone or other material into bronze is a complex, laborious, almost alchemical process. It's not something the sculptor does himself or herself in the comfort of the studio but rather with the participation of often several individuals in an industrial foundry.

Edgar Degas (pronounced De-gah, not Day-gah) never supervised the foundry casting of his originals

into bronze -- an alloy, largely, of tin and copper -- nor did he ever sign the bronzes that were manufactured in his name. This, of course, is because the bronzes that have made his name one of the most famous and revered in the history of Western sculpture were cast in the decades following his death, from cerebral congestion, in 1917.

In the last 25 years, scholars have been able to pretty much determine how the delicate wax, clay and mixed-media originals shaped by Degas's own hands were translated into the more permanent medium of bronze. Here's a highly simplified outline of that process:

1. The wax original was covered in clay, then plaster. After the plaster dried, the mould was opened and the clay replaced with a cold-set (to ensure the wax would not melt) gelatin mould similar to Jello.
2. After the gelatin mould stiffened, the original it surrounded was removed to the foundry cellar. The mould, in turn, became the basis for a duplicate wax of the original when hot wax was poured into the mould's hollow, reinforced core.
3. Once the wax cooled, it could be used in what's known as the "lost-wax process," or *cire perdue*.
4. For this, the duplicate wax was encased in clay, then the clay was fired in a kiln.
5. The intense heat of the kiln solidified the clay, but melted the wax inside it.
6. After the clay had hardened, molten bronze was poured into its hollow interior, filling up the spaces where the wax was.
7. After the bronze set, the outer layer of clay was broken to reveal the *modèle* underneath. From this master bronze, new gelatin moulds likely were made in preparation for the 22 serialized casts (more or less) of the sculptures outlined in the contract between the foundry and the Degas estate.



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