TORONTO STAR
www.thestar.com

Oct. 11, 2003. 01:00 AM

Degas is about vitality

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ART BY NUMBERS

It's fortunate that Michael Parke-Taylor is into collecting vintage rock'n'roll movie posters. It will help him appreciate the irony of the hassles he and the Art Gallery of Ontario are enduring these days, all of which start with John Lennon.

Parke-Taylor is the AGO curator charged with handling its "Degas Sculptures" show starting today to Jan.4. The 73 small bronzes — clustered in groups reflecting French artist Edgar Degas's favourite subjects, mostly dancers, horses, jockeys, women bathing — come from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, one of four complete sets of Degas bronzes extant.

The hassles start here. Gary Arseneau figures that since Degas, who died in 1917 at age 83, was long gone when the statues were first cast, these pieces — in fact *all* Degas bronze sculpture — is "counterfeit," the word used to headline his fiery press release blasting the AGO last week.

And this is where John Lennon comes in.

For Arseneau, a Florida-based artist and gallery owner, the issue isn't just about fat-cat art institutions pulling the wool over the eyes of innocents (although he does wonder "why these pieces aren't in the gift shop" like the rest of the expensive copies).

It's personal. "As a printmaker, I do original printmaking," says Arseneau on the phone. "A lithograph must be wholly executed by the artist. But I have to contend with the artwork of John Lennon, who's put out more than 100 editions of his work since he died (in 1980). How come someone who's dead is putting out more work than I do? A sculpture is an original artwork, like a painting. You can't paint posthumously. You can't make sculpture posthumously."

In fact, *La Petite danseuse de quatorze ans (Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen)*, the most famous of all Degas pieces and the star of the AGO show, was shown in 1881 at the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition. Then the defiant wax figure was in a horsehair wig and was dressed in a hair ribbon, slippers and a cloth tutu hanging down over her knees.

She was a shock, this scruffy little ballet "rat," as the ballet children were called. And Degas was condemned. Trounced for his "repulsive" image — young Marie van Goetham, the artist's model, was believed to have been a teenage prostitute as well as dancer — the artist kept the figure in his studio for the rest of his life. Stinging from the criticism, Degas was in no hurry to show other sculpture.

Two years back, Arseneau levelled much the same accusation of inauthenticity at the Royal Ontario Museum for its exhibition of 48 plaster sculptures and 18 bronzes from French sculptor Auguste Rodin. Only one "legitimate" Rodin could be found in the entire lot, said Arseneau. The rest were fakes.

Compared to the AGO, the ROM got off lightly. The AGO is showing "73 non-disclosed, third-generation-removed reproductions/fakes, misrepresented as `sculptures' with counterfeit `Degas' signatures posthumously applied," goes Arseneau's press release.

What also bugs Arseneau are the very real prices all this "fake" work is attracting. (The museum business "is

incestuous to the extreme," he feels.) And it's not just with Degas. In the late '90s, a posthumous casting of a nine-piece grouping, *La Clairière (The Glade)* by Alberto Giacometti, fetched around $1.5 million — almost $1 million less than for the same group cast during the artist's lifetime. In the Degas market over the years, collectors have anted up more than $17 million for a bronze cast of *La Petite danseuse.*

Parke-Taylor has heard it all before. "One problem with his argument is that it's wrong," he says as we walk through the show. "The real issue is with posthumous casting. And in art there is a long history of posthumous casting when it comes to many artists — Rodin, Bourdelle, Renoir and a number of others."

To this end the AGO has established text panels on the gallery walls that lead the viewer through the Degas sculpture controversy. According to the gallery, Degas fully intended to cast his work in bronze. From 1900 to 1903, he made three plaster casts, a preliminary step to casting in bronze, and called sculptor Albert Bartholomé "my could-be caster." This is evidence enough for the AGO to believe that Degas would have done what others only later came to do.

Evidently, the artist's own disinclination to create bronze casts under his supervision didn't deter his heirs from acting on the matter. Visiting his studio, they came across some 150 wax pieces and realized what a treasure trove they represented. In partnership with the Hébrard foundry in Paris, they began the Degas sculpture business in earnest — and the Degas controversy.

But is it over? What also rubs Arseneau the wrong way is the possibility that someone can keep making "new" original Degas sculpture. The last was cast in 1953, he warns. (A Rodin was cast as recently as the '80s, more than 63 years after the sculptor's death.)

In the end, Degas heirs and Hébrard's representatives found that only about half the studio models were in satisfactory condition — the heads on many of the female pieces in the AGO show are little more than blobs — to form the foundation of the 20 editions of the complete set. There are only four complete sets — or five, depending on whom you believe and the way they count — still together.

One way the AGO may have found to circumvent Arseneau's fundamental contention that the artist's own hand must touch the work to give it legitimacy is to follow the lead of the Burrell Collection, in Glasgow, which called its 1994 exhibition of 75 Degas sculptures "Degas In Bronze," not "Degas Bronzes," as the AGO calls them.

This wording better reflects how these rather late-period wax figures — crafted most likely as studies of how human and animal forms work in motion — could reappear in a different guise and yet still retain a connection to the original creation.

Passionate about photography, a craze sweeping France in the 1860s and '70s, Degas adopted its potential for his own work. One reason his paintings of dancers seem so "right" to our eyes today comes from the distinctly photographic angles he set them in, like "snapping" an instant in *La classe de danse* (1880) as if he was just passing with camera. The panoramic *Les Jockeys* (1881-85) is framed by a zoomed-in close-up emphasizing the looming, dominating head of a horse. Sports photography starts here.

Degas's photographic eye, catching the moment, is translated again by these sculptures although anyone expecting a blockbuster moment will likely be disappointed.

These pieces are doll-like in stature, although most of the others are monumentally urgent. His horses aren't speeding. They're rearing, twisting and lurching. They're shape rising up.

His dancers aren't cute nymphets, the pampered daughters of Paris bourgeoisie. They're fleshy and vital women, twisting this way and that — you can see Degas's finger and thumbprints all over their forms — trying to break out of the space they're in.

They reflect the anxiousness that Degas brought to his later work, where colour appears to have been lashed on the surface and his charcoal scraped into the line he was drawing. Gone is the classical repose you find in earlier work. Degas, a bachelor growing blind, inward and bitter with old age, was in fact inventing a new kind of art for himself. Expressionism starts here.

Getting around to the sculpture could be left to later.

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