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Degas in Bronze at Phoenix Art Museum



Sculpture by Degas

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PHOENIX, ARIZONA.- The exhibition Degas in Bronze is now open at the Phoenix Art Museum, on view until May 30, 2004. Edgar Degas is recognized as one of the most important artists of the 19th century. Known to the public primarily as a painter and draftsman, he also was considered a great sculptor by such artist contemporaries as Auguste Renoir and Mary Cassatt. More than 150 wax sculptures and sculpture fragments were found in his studio after his death in 1917. They were conceptually unique works of art, used by the artist as three-dimensional sketches in his exploration of human movement. This exhibition features a collection of 73 of Degas' bronze sculptures, including the famed Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen, from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil. It is one of only four complete sets of the artist's bronzes in existence.

The exhibition offers an intimate understanding of how Degas evolved to become an important impressionist artist and a fuller view of his creative genius for representing the figure in motion. He looked at life in Paris with a new eye, especially through his two favorite subjects, dancers and horses – they shared an array of motion, pose and expression, to which Degas dedicated his career. These concepts were infused in his sculptures, as explored in this exhibition, as well as his paintings, pastels, prints, drawings and photographs. Degas' innovative compositions, skillful drawing, and perceptive analysis of movement made him one of the masters of modern art in the late 19th century.

Born in 1834, Degas was the eldest son of a wealthy Parisian banking family. The relative financial security he enjoyed throughout his career allowed him the freedom to experiment artistically without concern for selling his work. His early training with Ingres disciple Louis Lamothe and a brief stay at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts provided Degas with a thorough grounding in the classical tradition, with its emphasis on drawing and line, which stayed with Degas throughout his lifetime. A pivotal encounter with Édouard Manet during a visit to the Louvre in 1862 led to his introduction to a group of young artists meeting at the Café Guérbois, who soon would become known as the Impressionists. Though he preferred to consider himself a "realist" or "naturalist" rather than an "impressionist," Degas organized several exhibitions of the Impressionists, starting in 1874. Regardless of the medium in which he worked – painting, sculpture, pastel, drawing, etching, lithography or monotype – Degas showed himself to be a keen observer of everyday scenes, capturing natural positions and breaking down movement in order to grasp its underlying rhythms. Unlike the Impressionists, however, Degas rarely painted en plein-air – outside, directly from nature. He preferred to work from memory and from sketches.

Degas began to make small sculptures in wax in the late 1860s, the first of these coinciding with his growing fascination with scenes from the racetrack. The many wax sculptures of horses and jockeys he created during this period functioned as three-dimensional sketches that he used to conceptualize the elaborate compositions of some of his paintings. Degas's Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen of 1881 marked a radical turning point in the artist's approach to working in sculpture in a number of ways. It represented not only Degas's first ambitious attempt to create a fully realized work in sculpture for public exhibition, but it is one of his very first sculptures of a human figure.

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