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Dubious Degas

Edgar Degas never worked in bronze. So don't let the Phoenix Art Museum fool you.

BY STEPHEN LEMONS

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The ads running in Phoenix's local media couldn't be more straightforward, and seemingly guileless. Beneath a photo of one of the art world's most popular icons, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, is the title of the exhibition now on display until May 30 at the Phoenix Art Museum, "Degas in Bronze." The brief description makes no bones about what visitors will get when they pony up their \$12 admission fee:

"Known primarily as a painter, Edgar Degas was also a great sculptor. See all 73 of Degas' bronzes in this special exhibition from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil."

Ah, Degas, one of the immortal Impressionists, known collectively as the art world's gold standard, a sure draw these days for any museum or gallery looking to move warm bodies past the turnstiles. And here we have, according to this ad, "all 73" of the master's bronzes. Why, anyone with even the most cursory interest in great art would not dream of missing this once-in-a-lifetime exhibition.

It's a fine Sunday afternoon, but just a little too hot, and thus perfect for a couple of hours indoors with the irascible Frenchman who died in



Faux fabulous: Degas never saw or approved this bronze of *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*.

Details

"Degas in Bronze"

Continues at the Phoenix Art Museum through May 30.

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1917 at the age of 83 -- and who was and is still known for his arresting images of ballerinas, women bathing, racehorses, absinthe-drinkers, and brothels. You arrive, hand over a dozen simoleons, and proceed to the exhibit where a video presentation introduces you to what you're about to see. Footage of living, breathing ballerinas melts into bronze figurines. A voice-over explains that "Degas' work in sculpture intensified as he aged," and that "his sculptures capture the control and strength of the dancer."

But what is not explained in this video, or in the ads running in the local media, and what one may not catch unless one has paid close attention to specific passages of wall text in the exhibition itself, is that Degas never touched, approved or saw these bronzes. Indeed, there was no way that he could have, because they were commissioned by his heirs after his death from the scores of wax and mixed-media sculptures left in his studio. Visitors had seen them, but save for *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, which was displayed in its original wax form in April 1881 as part of the Sixth Impressionist exposition in Paris, none had been exhibited. And in the case of *Little Dancer*, audiences were so shocked by its realism that Degas never again displayed it publicly.

In fact, Degas seemed mostly doubtful about these figures he had created of wax, cork, wood and other detritus, and in an account reprinted in the exhibition's \$85 catalogue, he explained that his wax figures were meant mainly as studies for himself. It's an account borne out in part by the rough, unfinished nature of much of what's on display at PAM, albeit several steps removed from Degas' hands.

"They are exercises to get me going," he told an acquaintance, in a passage that ironically undercuts PAM's show. "Documentary, preparatory motions, nothing more. None of this is intended for sale. . . . My sculptures will never have the feel of being finished, which is the ultimate end in a sculptor's workmanship, and after all, since no one will ever see these rough sketches, nobody will dare to talk about them, not even you. From this day forward until my death, this will all be destroyed by itself and this will be best for my reputation."

Degas did not have his wax sculptures cast in bronze, nor did he leave instructions that this be done. At one point, he did have plaster casts made of three sculptures, but he never proceeded beyond this stage, though he could have done so at any time as the casts were made many years before his death. If we take Degas at his word, and there seems to be no reason not to, it's clear he did not want those wax figurines, most of which now sit on display in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to survive him. This is significantly different from other artists who have authorized posthumous editions of their artwork.

So what the hell *are* these 73 statuettes, how come they have Degas' signature on them, and how high should we hang the brain trust at the Phoenix Art Museum for billing the show as "Degas' bronzes" when at best they should be billed as "posthumous bronze reproductions of wax studies and figurines that the artist did not want preserved"?

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Depending on whom you ask, there may be extant anywhere from around 1,300 to more than 1,600 posthumously made bronzes of the original Degas waxes. When Degas keeled over, his heirs swooped down in a frenzy of greed and decided to have 73 of the waxes cast in bronze by the Hebrard Foundry in Paris, 72 plus the little dancer. (A 74th was also cast sometime in the 1950s.) Initially, 22 casts of each of these figures were to be made. The Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, owns a complete master *modele* set of the bronzes used to make the other bronzes. Through an ingenious variation of the so-called lost wax method, the original wax/mixed-media sculptures were preserved, as normally they would be destroyed by the heat of the process.

"In 1976, the Norton Simon Art Foundation bought the set of foundry models (the *modele* set) from the Hebrard estate," writes Sara Campbell, senior curator at that museum, via e-mail. "The Norton Simon *modele* set is important because it is the set made directly from the wax originals. All other bronzes were made from the Norton Simon set. The *modeles* differ from the other bronzes in that they are on average 3 percent larger (as bronze shrinks as it cools), and the quality of the patina and the crispness of the casting is superior."

Despite the imprimatur of the Degas estate and the "Degas" signature stamp placed on the base of each of the bronzes by the foundry, the 73 found in this traveling exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum are little more than highfalutin knockoffs. This is a crucial point, I think, because the Phoenix Art Museum has not described the show in its ads as "Degas' posthumous bronzes," "estate editions of Degas," or some other more accurate term. They are described as "Degas' bronzes," and are mostly presented to the public as such, with the occasional cover-your-ass paragraph or two usually deep in the wall text. After all, the bronzes are presented by PAM with very little context and none of Degas' paintings or drawings, almost as if the exhibition had leapt complete from the mind of a dead man.

The issue of these posthumous bronzes is not new. When a similar group of posthumous Degas bronzes made a stop at the Art Gallery of Ontario in October of 2003, they touched off a firestorm in Canada. The Royal Ontario Museum had recently been embroiled in a nasty fracas with France involving a display of disputed plaster casts of Auguste Rodin, one artist who evidently did grant permission for posthumous estate editions to be made, thus giving every podunk outdoor museum the world over copies of *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*. Kate Taylor, writing for "Canada's national newspaper" *The Globe and Mail*, was livid over these dubious Degas, sputtering that the show "exhibits a hucksterism that can make an art lover increasingly cynical about that supposedly sacred place, the art museum."

Mat Gleason, founder and publisher of the rabble-rousing, bicoastal art mag *Coagula*, agrees.

"I can understand the average person who enjoys art, who's not an art professional, not knowing the full details about what a scam the so-called 'Degas bronzes' are," says Gleason from *Coagula's* L.A. offices. "But for museum personnel to try to pass this off as a show of any interest beyond an anthropological one is astounding.

Basically this is saying that the people in Phoenix don't deserve to be told the truth about art and artistic production. You can measure aesthetics a lot of different ways. These bronzes may be pretty, but the fact is they are borderline forgeries."

Patricia Failing, Degas scholar and professor at the University of Washington's School of Art, is not quite the bomb-thrower Gleason is, but her candor on the subject of Degas' posthumous bronzes is refreshing. She has suggested in her criticism that the bronzes be regarded as "collaborations" between Degas and other individuals such as Albino Palazzolo, the Hebrard Foundry's chief caster of bronzes. She's referred to the bronzes in various publications as "posthumous casts not authorized by the artist," and elsewhere as a "death mask" of sorts.

"The wax originals *are* the artist's work," she said to me recently. "The bronzes are reproductions of the work in another medium. They do tell you something important about the artist. And they are worth having the public view and understand. But the problem is that people really don't know what they're looking at."

For me, the problem is not that these posthumous bronzes have no educational or aesthetic value whatsoever, but this is in part because I was already somewhat familiar with Degas' life and art prior to visiting the show. So when viewing some rough and apparently unfinished pieces, I can still compare them in my mind's eye with Degas' paintings. (My mind's eye must suffice because PAM offers us no Degas paintings in this exhibition!) The *Little Dancer*, especially, is uniquely fascinating, slightly simian, and quite entrancing despite the fact I've seen similar copies in numerous other museums. Still, the fact that there are not even photos of the Degas waxes with which to compare *Little Dancer* and other such bronzes speaks more to the intention to deceive the public, in my opinion, rather than educate us. These comparisons are made in the price catalogue, but why not in the exhibition itself?

Little Dancer is not the only bronze of some excellence present. The bronzes that show women washing themselves, like *The Tub*, can be captivating. And there are several of the dancers doing arabesques which are lovely to behold, even though these finished bronzes have in most cases eliminated the wire supports necessary to keep the wax originals standing. Essentially, the bronzes have been sanitized and gussied up for the masses, and such activity is equivalent to making aesthetic decisions for the artist, decisions made by a slew of intermediaries.

In some cases, the bronzes are most definitely not ready for prime time, and are about as commanding in appearance as a lump of unformed clay. A piece like *The Bow*, for instance, which is similar to the sort of stick figure a child would make with twigs and mud, or some of the horse sculptures like *Draft Horse*, are downright depressing. They may have some monetary value (these bronzes can fetch anywhere from \$100,000 to \$10 million on the open market), but so, no doubt, would Degas' chamber pot.

The image of poor Degas doing turns in his Montmartre grave flashes through the synapses when looking at such dreck. But the fault lies not with the artist, but with the legions of museum officials

and academics who keep this charade afloat. Specifically, the Phoenix Art Museum has cynically squandered any educational value for the opportunity to charge a premium price for their tickets (usually it's \$9 for adults) to get people in their doors and sell the normal gift-shop crap such as Degas lollipops, handbags, coffee mugs, mint servers and even -- egad! -- bags of pasta shaped like little ballerinas. To be fair, all museums sell this sort of junk. I remember going to a Van Gogh exhibition once where they sold plastic Van Gogh ears as souvenirs! But it doesn't make PAM's mercantilism any more appetizing.

PAM's director, James Ballinger, denied that his museum had misrepresented the "Degas in Bronze" show, and seemed surprised by any suggestion otherwise. These bronzes are celebrated the world over, so what's all the hubbub about, sonny?

"Degas created all of these sculptures as part of his work," insisted Ballinger, pointing out that almost no sculptor produces his or her own bronzes. "He had them in his studio displayed for friends. He exhibited the 14-year-old dancer in the 1881 Impressionist exhibition. So he created all of these subjects."


Contrast Ballinger's willful blindness with the frankness of Albino Palazzolo himself, who, when asked by a writer for *Art News* in 1955 if he could spot an illegitimate bronze, smiled and said that he could, because he knew where to find his own fingerprints on the originals.

PAM officials point out that for \$12, Phoenicians also get to see PAM's truly execrable "American Beauty" show, with its smattering of masters amidst roomfuls of mediocrity. But that's hardly compensation for their misleading claims and dissimulations. Folks would be better off checking out a book on Degas from the library.


Not only would that be free, it would also be honest.

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