

Degas in Bronze

Boise Art Museum hosts a major collection

by E.J. Pettinger

Looking back into the recent history of art the beginnings of the modern era hold a particular charm. Possibility loomed large. Formal innovations arrived like changes to the structure of reality. Something like a more deliberate brush stroke could signal a new way of seeing. The complacent prestige and tired tradition of the Academy were being fitfully replaced by a desire for sincerity and discovery. Where classical pictorial space relied on a suspension of disbelief and a total illusion the new art was pressing toward its own autonomous reality. Technical rigor and aesthetic sense met creative freedom and the result was a lot of very good art. Over time autonomy gave way to irony and anymore the pressure for novelty can seem like a liability. But at the close of the 19th century it packed a lot of promise.

Out of that era came many major figures. Artists like Manet, Monet and Cezanne are appreciated as much now as they were in their own time. In fact, by the standards of the greatest abstraction of all—money—they enjoy more appreciation at present.

From that charmed era Edgar Degas stands out as a master draftsman and formal innovator. His attention to human and animal forms in the living shape of their movements is an aesthetic achievement with few equals. Currently, BAM is exhibiting one of the four existing complete collections of bronzes based on Degas' original wax and clay sculptures. It is one of the most important and prestigious shows the museum has ever mounted, an effort that took the cooperation of some major institutions and a tremendous amount of pre-planning.

In order to get it out of the way so we can move on to what's really important I'll just say that the title of the show, Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures is accurate. These pieces, 73 in all, are Degas in bronze; however, they are not technically Degas bronzes. From a text accompanying the show we read, "When he died in 1917, Degas left a group of almost 150 sculptures in his studio, of subjects including dancers, bathers and horses. Like his drawings, some of the sculptures represented fully worked compositions. The majority, however—built up on armatures and modeled using a variety of materials including wax, plastilene, cloth and plaster—functioned as sketches. Sadly, not all the sculptures were in salvageable condition. In order to preserve as many of the sculptures as possible, friends and colleagues—with the blessing of Degas' heirs—had the works in the best condition posthumously cast in bronze by the famous Parisian foundry of Adrien Hebrard."

The fact that these bronzes were not given Degas' "OK," that they do not possess exactly the same surfaces or hues as the fragile originals and that their signatures were stamped should be known. That said, those facts do not substantially detract from the experience.

Walking through this collection is a lesson in aesthetic enjoyment. It becomes abundantly clear with works like Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot, Woman Seated in an Armchair Wiping Her Left Armpit, and Horse Balking that Degas was attempting to capture the natural spontaneity and feeling of life. These pieces are like loose gestural sketches done in bronze. Their technical mastery is based in dynamics more than surfaces, in spontaneous life more than idealized illusion. What you see is the small pause just before a change of motion, or the supreme balance that spreads out inside the most mundane of motions. Degas was apparently filled with a passion for the way in which life moves through form and these works are a true testimony of that study. Anyone who has spent time drawing the human figure knows that the greatest challenge is finding the lines that describe it without turning it into a pillar of salt. All of these pieces have the quality of impending movement—they look like they're about to move.

Late in his life Degas is quoted saying, "The older I become the more clearly I realized that to achieve exactitude so perfect in the representation of animals that the feeling of life is conveyed, one had to go into three dimensions." I'm glad he did.

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