

Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/onwisconsin/arts/may05/325570.asp>

COMMENTARY

Dancing delicately around 'Degas dilemma'

By MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER
mshumacher@journalsentinel.com

Last Updated: May 14, 2005

What makes the "Degas Sculptures" exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum worth seeing is the same thing that made "The Da Vinci Code" a runaway bestseller - art historical intrigue.

What makes the exhibit problematic is that seeing the sculptures may be more like looking at the \$175 figurines in the gift shop than looking at original artworks from the hands of Edgar Degas.

What's in question is whether the sculptures of turning dancers, bathing women and galloping horses can be appropriately considered to be *by* Degas. Cast in bronze after the artist's death and without the artist's consent, the sculptures are profoundly different from the wax and clay originals.

A sense of remove is undeniable. Trying to have a direct encounter with Degas at the show is a bit like learning what it's like to live in New York City by watching "Sex and the City" or falling in love online without a face-to-face relationship.

The bronzes now permeate the planet, with so many museums having their requisite copies.

These "weary entertainers," as they were once called by art historian Richard Kendall, are so ubiquitous that the art-going public is conditioned to view them as by Degas' hand.

Their mere presence in museums and exhibitions invites people to assume they are significant works of original art, rather than something more complicated and informal.

And all of this contributes to a romanticized and oversimplified view of the artist as simply a lover of the ballet and horse races.

The "Degas dilemma," as it has been called, is not a simple controversy, and not everyone agrees with this point of view, certainly, including the museum's curators and many respected art historians.

With a dearth of information about such an important artist, particularly related to the sculptures, art historians have understandably been seduced into extensive research. Still, no one can say for sure what the original sculptures were for.

Should we look at them as sketches, rough drafts or, worse, outtakes? Was Degas, who was always so concerned with capturing bodies in motion, working out compositional problems? Were they rough, in-progress sculptures?

When Degas died in 1917, about 150 sculptures were found "pell mell on the floor" of his studio, as one art historian put it.

The artist's dealer Joseph Durand-Ruel inventoried the works, made of beeswax, non-drying modeling clay, metal armatures and sometimes bulked up or embellished with found materials such as cork.

Heirs' decision

Durand-Ruel found many to be worthless and broken, though 30 were "quite fine," he said. And yet a total of 73 were reproduced in bronze.

'Degas Sculptures'



A bronze of "Little Dancer," the only sculpture Degas intended to exhibit.



Degas' wax and clay Spanish dancers that were

It's important to note, the museums that show these works didn't choose to have the bronzes cast.

That was the decision of the artist's heirs in 1918, less than a year after Degas' death, when issues of scholarship and authenticity were perhaps less important than making the works available and marketable.

Only one, "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen," was ever intended for exhibition.

The artist's choice of medium for that work - tinted and fragile wax, a horse hair wig, a satin hair ribbon, a gauze tutu, a silk bodice and pink ballet slippers - was unheard of and called amateurish, campy even, by critics.

Degas premiered the work at the sixth annual Impressionist exhibition in 1881 after working on "Petite Danseuse de quatorze ans," as it was known by its original French name, since the late 1870s.

He had promised the work for the 1880 show, but never delivered. As it was, the sculpture arrived late to the 1881 show.

For his eyes only

After that, Degas never showed sculpture again. Though he continued to make sculpture, they remained in his studio or apartment.

In 1921, journalist Francois Thiebault-Sisson recalled that Degas once said:

"I modeled 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. My sculptures will never give that impression of completion that is the ultimate goal of the statue-maker's trade, and since, after all, no one will ever see these efforts, no one should think of speaking about them, not even you. After my death all that will fall apart by itself, and that will be better for my reputation."

Most artists would be mortified at the thought of having private works made purely for their "own satisfaction" exhibited after their death - representing their careers to a degree, no less.

Even if Degas was coaxed closer to the idea of casting in a more permanent medium, which some say was the case, showing his work so widely without his express permission could easily be thought of as a betrayal or at least a misrepresentation.

"He never, ever wanted to have casts made," said Anne Pingeot, conservator general and Degas scholar at Paris' Musée d'Orsay, when she came to Milwaukee to see the show open.

Energy, rhythm preserved

Sometimes, though, the importance of an artist can outweigh such concerns, Pingeot argued.

Though a different form, consider the posthumous publication of "The Last Tycoon," F. Scott Fitzgerald's rough and unfinished novel.

And, in truth, the existence of the bronzes is ultimately a gift, particularly to scholars.

They record and preserve the energy and rhythm of Degas' original artworks that, to this day, continue to deteriorate. They provide a glimpse into the thinking of one of the greatest French Impressionist artists and the forms and movement that interested him.

But the personality of the original artworks is compromised in the bronzes, too.

The tactile, translucent nature of the wax surfaces conveyed a large part of Degas' meaning, and that is substantially lost in bronze.

The originals were ephemeral, often obviously worked and reworked by hand, perhaps guided by the nature of the materials themselves, while the bronzes are inflexible and permanent. Degas' use of wax was innovative, an avant-garde act for its time, and the bronzes have a more academic and traditional feel.

Looking at the works in the show, which is beautifully installed, it is hard to know how to think about the sculptures.

The variety of patinas of the bronzes is often sumptuous, despite the distinction from the wax.

cast into bronze are part of the "Degas Sculptures" show at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

If You Go

■ **What:** "Degas Sculptures"

■ **Where:** Milwaukee Art Museum,

■ **When:** Through June 5

■ **Admission:** \$12 adults, \$10 seniors, \$8 students, and children 12 and under free. This ticket includes general Museum admission. Call (414) 224-3220 or visit www.mam.org.

📖 **FYI:** Event details

Placed in groups according to subject, the museum visitor is invited to see Degas' working through, sometimes furiously, the movement of the running horse or the ballet dancer performing an arabesque.

Though the smallest of compositional details are similar from one sculpture in a grouping to the next, some sculptures are very finished, while others are more gestural and roughhewn with basic elements obscured.

A few of the compositions seem awkward and contrived, though, the believability of some forms falls apart from certain vantage points.

Many of the female figures are torqued and bent in odd positions, for example, balancing on one foot while pulling on stockings, reaching to clean the small of their backs.

Problems with casting

It's complicated, but the process of bronze casting is important to consider here, too. Here's how it worked. Gelatin molds of the original, fragile waxes were made, and from those flexible molds duplicate waxes were created. That second series of waxes was then used in a lost-wax technique to create a master set of bronze *modèles*. Then gelatin molds were made from the *modèles* to create additional sets of wax casts. And, finally, the latter sets of casts were used in the lost-wax technique to create the serialized bronzes we are all so familiar with.

Though the foundry was likely quite precise and thoughtful in its attempt to preserve the contours of Degas' work, various "corrections" and changes were made to the surfaces and shapes along the way, perhaps to repair some of the more sketchy forms or to create more appealing, finished works.

And so, from one sculpture to the next and from one serialized set to the next, the bronzes vary in quality and appearance.

The reproductions of the less "fine" sculptures are perhaps those with more awkward compositions. Some of the sets are also closer in surface detail and color to the originals than others.

The investigations into Degas' sculptures have been intense in recent decades, but it's safe to say that major questions remain wide open, too. For example, do the more unbridled sculptures betray a quick mind working through problems, a quick hand working in an on-the-spot Impressionist mode or is there a more modern expressiveness as well?

Such questions are simply not served nearly as well by viewing the bronzes alone. But purchasing the catalog *raisonné*, for a reduced price of \$30 at the museum's shop, with images of the original waxes and a collection of essays by some of the best scholars on the case, is a wonderful steeping into the art historical stew of it all.

Sculptures group thematically

For the average museum visitor, then, the bronzes require a lot of translation. Any museum would be challenged by the task of bringing all of the complex issues to life.

Laurie Winters, curator of earlier European art at the Milwaukee Art Museum, though she has dismissed issues about the "Degas dilemma," has gone to great lengths to contextualize the bronzes for the show here.

At the entrance to the show, for example, there is a display showing the mechanics of the casting process. The sculptures themselves are grouped thematically with nearly 20 two-dimensional works that are worth seeing unto themselves and provide additional context for Degas' ideas about movement and form. A few of the drawings and pastels have quick, sketchy passages not unlike the sculptures.

At the exit to the show, the museum has re-created a ballet studio, a replica of a room at the Paris Opera found in Degas' paintings. Regular performances by local dancers offer an opportunity to watch exercises that captured the artist's attention.

All of this is valiantly done, though the bronzes coupled with the contextual approach may be more appropriate to an historical museum than an art museum.

The show is an undeniable treat, in many ways.

It is impossible to think otherwise, seeing, for example, young girls twirling in tutus (admission to the show is free for those donning tutus on Tuesdays). It has attracted nearly 60,000 visitors and the museum projects as much as 73,000 will have seen the show when it closes June 5 (about half the attendance of the "Leonardo da Vinci and the Splendor of Poland" show in 2002, when attendance was boosted by the museum's new building, and slightly better than other popular exhibits, including shows of Georgia O'Keeffe's work and Dale Chihuly's work).

Yet, while all of the open questions and intrigue, in a way, make the show more interesting, the experience of Degas is simply too indirect. The

medium that was used to safeguard and perpetuate Degas as a sculptor is what ultimately, in the end, separates us from him.

Several articles from art journals were consulted as background research for this report, including pieces by the following art historians: Anne Pingeot, Joseph S. Czestochowski, Patricia Failing, Richard Kendall, Roger Crum, June Hargrove, Hilton Kramer, Karen Wilkin, Jeffrey Meyers, Daphne Barbour, Sara Campbell, Shelley Sturman and Theodore Reff.

Appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on May 15, 2005.
Get the Journal Sentinel delivered to your home. [Subscribe now.](#)