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To:

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Re: 73 bronze sculptures by Degas – Horses, Bathers and Dancers

On view at the Frederik Meijer Gardens from the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, Brazil
Meijer Garden and Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan
May 30 – August 31, 2008

The focus of any Degas (1834-1917) sculpture exhibit is ostensibly *The Little 14-Year Old Dancer*, the only sculpture exhibited in Degas' lifetime. It is arresting for many reasons. The poise and reach of her stance is feminine and matter-of-fact. But at its display in the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition, Paris 1881, critics called the posture tasteless. Her aloof, self-saving expression is at odds with her youthful age. Her costume is a lace-edged bronze bodice, incommensurate, almost medieval. The skirt, however, is true fabric, un-dyed tulle, naturally yellowed, delicate. She wears a satin hair ribbon. Small at 98 cm tall, she is 3 times bigger than the others. The piece is full of contradictions and appeal.

Yet one's eyes and heart can be drawn easily to any of the other 72 pieces. The awkward balance of a rearing horse, one of 17 horses in the collection, captures your attention just as he throws himself up, back and sideways using his heavy head as a fulcrum. The intimacy of the bather in *The Tub* thoroughly enjoying herself while we watch is a gift of easy camaraderie. One imagines sitting nearby in the studio chatting with her and absently fingering the *objets trouvés* that once made up the base.

Degas chose to bring the world into his studio. He preferred to look at life in its reality. He chose models from everyday pursuits. He added actuality to wax, clay and plasticine such as fabric, wood and ceramics. The negative reaction of the public to his *14-Year Old Dancer* did not stop him from exploring these ideas in sculpture. He made over 150 pieces from the 1860's to around 1910. None of them were exhibited. The 14-year old girl did not reappear publicly until after his death, in 1920.

Of the sculptures recovered after his 1917 death, his heirs selected 73 that were in good enough shape to reproduce in bronze. Imagine walking into that room, the little hulks of wax and matte clay sitting on shelves under layers of dust. What a treasure trove. In 1918 his heirs hired Degas' friend Paul-Albert Bartholome to prepare the pieces for casting which were executed in bronze by A.-A. Hebrard et Cie, in Paris, with the work mainly done by the master Albino Palazzolo (1883-1973). The collection at Meijer Gardens is one of only 4 in the world from the A.A. Hebrard bronze castings.

All of the pieces are multi-themed explorations of movement and balance in space. Many are unfinished. Typical is the dancer with her arms opened delicately to the world. The right arm is a bit of twisted wire, a bone so lightly extended as to seem more like seaweed in the river flow than a human arm. Both the working artist interested in armature and the sympathetic human pause beside her.

This unfinished state defines many of the bronzes. A refined figure might have one forgotten leg, one that resembles a twisted tree trunk, a mass of clay that grows into the base. A Degas' relief sculpture, there's only one in the collection, works stark and interesting angles that merge forgetfully into the vertical, blank background. They say that whatever force or action Degas explored in a figure was probably solved and at that point he abandoned the piece. He moved on to the next question and the next sculpture. On the other hand, he considered some of his unfinished pieces to be complete. For example, Degas gave permission for a plaster cast to be made of such a sculpture, his *Woman Rubbing Her Back with A Sponge*.

These diminutive pieces from the Museu de Arte de Sao Paul, Brazil, are all under glass here in Grand Rapids, in several roomy spaces central to the Meijer Gardens complex. The walls are chalky purple. Black ceilings are dotted like a starry sky with spotlights. The floors are finished wood, soft and caramel-colored. When the collection was exhibited in other venues the walls of each space were dominated by one color - either white, or beige, or yellow or dark green. Curator of Sculpture at Meijer Gardens Joe Becherer and his layout team felt that a white color range made the pieces even smaller. They chose a chalky purple composed of both cold blues and warm reds. The hue works well here partnered with the ceiling lighting to outline the figures in yellow light. The sharply lit edges balance the darkness that is inherent in bronze.

The spotlighting defines the slab nature of many of Degas' surfaces, highlighting the edges. Each swipe of clay is a muscle running over a horse's rump or a flat bone such as the human scapula. These look accurate, elucidating Degas' deep knowledge of anatomy, both equine and human. The patinas of the bronze under the room's overall warmth sparkle with earthy reds, oranges, browns and blacks. What a successful study of movement in stasis! - The only negative for the viewer is that many pieces are near walls. Following one's eyes, absorbed in the sculpture, one suddenly bumps into a wall. But with over 500,000 visitors a year to Meijer Gardens, rules of access and insurance can't be circumvented, even for Degas' sculptures.

The exhibit notes Degas' interest in the emerging art of photography, displaying Eadweard Muybridge's sequential shots. Muybridge photos of running horses and athletes captured what the eye could not see. His photos revealed that a horse's gallop contained one phase where all four feet were off the ground. Degas the sculptor was fascinated by such subtle movements in both athletes such as horses and dancers as well as in the muscle movements of bathers focusing on their bodies as they washed

Degas successfully stepped away from the Academics to balance a rocky stance in both impressionism and realism. The exhibit describes these philosophical parameters. It uses text written on the walls that explain the culture and art of the time. The pieces in the glass cage are wisely juxtaposed. In the Gardens' reading library there's a catalog (also on sale), compiled by Joseph S. Czeszochowski and Anne Pingeot, that includes the best words and visuals from past catalogs and essays.

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