

Eye to the Future

Degas' sculptures explore process, how an image is created

REVIEWED BY PERIN MAHLER

The publicity machine of French Impressionism reigns in the marketplace where art, commerce and celebrity converge. Witness huge attendance of retrospectives and sales of countless coffetable paraphernalia reproducing images of that most popular of modern movements. Although associated with the three original Impressionists painting in the late 1800s — Monet, Pissaro and Sisley — Edgar Degas' work moves beyond the blurred and broken color associated with their visual effects. Since Impressionism's renditions

dimensional work: female figures in balletic poses along with a few busts and horses at rest and in motion. At 10 to 18 inches, the scale is small; Degas absorbed movement at a single glance. With failing eyesight at the end of his life, he could only handle sculptures (much as Matisse worked with his late-in-life "cut-outs").

Degas did not perceive his sculptures as independent works — only the large bronze "Dancer at Fourteen Years" was exhibited in his lifetime — but were instead "exercises to get me started" and inform his other work. Degas spent as much time sculpting as painting and drawing, but his cavalier attitude toward their construction lost many for posterity. The contemporary eye, however, sees their emphasis on process and his sculptures' mixed media materials as Degas' most avant-garde contribution to modern art.

These sculptures bear the marks of the artist's hands. The wax is built up roughly in mounds; furrows where it was removed reveal the contour of fingertips. "Seated Woman Wiping Her Left Side" emerges from her chair as if given birth by it, trailed by the skein of her towel. The piled-up wax, the smears and fingerprints interrupt our experience of the sculptures as finished pieces, but the undiluted process allows us to participate in the act of creation.

Degas portrays his subjects profoundly sympathetically; their privacy is respected, dignified. Degas empathizes with the dancer who raises her leg to the barre for the 100th time, the troupe herded in front of the

instructor, the ballerina exhausted in front of a coal stove. He captures intimate, private moments behind the glamorous performance — as does contemporary photographer Annie Liebovitz.

Degas' faceless models are as absorbed in their tasks as he is in the process of capturing their movements, abstracting them into pure sculptural form. We do not sense, as in Renoir, that these women are posing for male delectation; no half-lidded stares or post-orgasmic smiles are depicted. Degas is more interested in the route traveled to achieve a spectacle than in the spectacle itself. His depiction of theater is anything but theatrical.

The paintings and works on paper at Dayton illustrate the relationship between Degas' two- and three-dimensional output. This exhibition, however, is definitely about Degas' sculptures, an aspect of his career historically maginalized. It reveals him as the chronicler of the unseen worlds behind the masks of theater and glamour.

Unlike Renoir, who abdicated to the stock image of woman as mindless sex object, or Monet, whose project was confined to the effects of light and perception, Degas' work reveals the mechanisms of the creation of (an) image. ©

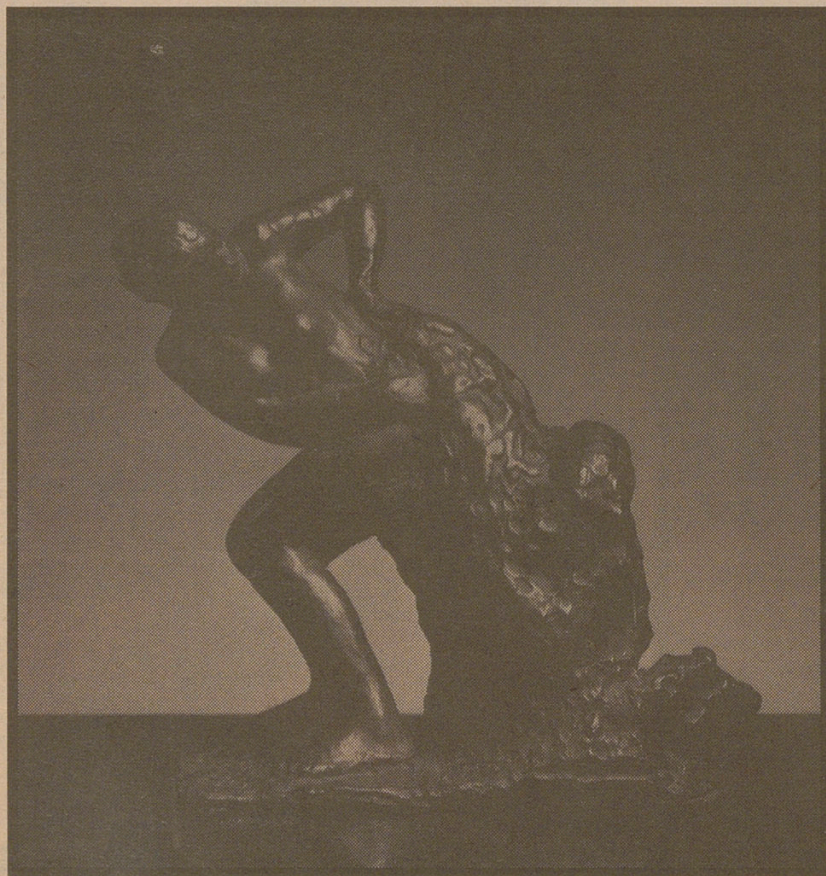


Photo courtesy of Dayton Art Institute

Edgar Degas viewed sculpture, such as his "Seated Woman Wiping Her Left Side" (circa 1900), as a way to improve his painting.

of bourgeois Parisians at leisure are its most prominent characteristics, Degas is generally associated with his popular paintings of ballet dancers and cabaret singers. No edition of Impressionist dinner plates or matchbook covers would be complete without a pastel *danseuse* in the glare of footlights.

Yet a world of difference exists between Monet, Renior and Degas.

During his five-decade career, Degas ceaselessly pursued the definitions of form and movement as well as the effects of color and light. Sculpture — the least known branch of his *oeuvre* — proves this: The Dayton Art Institute's *Edgar Degas: The Many Dimensions of a Master French Impressionist* (through Oct. 9) includes all his sculptures cast in bronze from his original waxes (as well as selected paintings, prints, drawings and pastels) and revises the common perception of Degas as an interchangeable prettifier of 19th-century Paris.

Sculpture subjects directly parallel Degas' two-

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