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Edgar Degas Sculpture Presents Historical and Scientific Studies on Premier Degas Sculpture Collection at the National Gallery of Art

Gallery Holds Comprehensive Collection of Degas' Painting, Sculpture, and Works on Paper



Edgar Degas Sculpture by Suzanne Glover Lindsay, Daphne S. Barbour, and Shelley G. Sturman with Barbara H. Berrie, Suzanne Quillen Lomax, and Michael Palmer. National Gallery of Art, Washington, and Princeton University Press (January 2011).

Washington, DC—The National Gallery of Art's holdings of works by Edgar Degas (1834–1917) include the world's greatest collection of the artist's lifetime sculptures, which is the focus of a new publication: ***Edgar Degas Sculpture***. The 19th volume in the Gallery's Systematic Catalogue of the permanent collections, this lavishly illustrated book presents the Gallery's unique collection. In 1956, the American collector Paul Mellon purchased the entire group of original Degas sculptures and gave the lion's share to the National Gallery of Art between 1985 and 1999.

Thanks to Mellon's generosity, the Gallery now houses 52 original Degas works in wax, clay, and plaster, including the famous *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1878–1881), as well as a dozen cast bronzes and one posthumously produced plaster. These casts include two bronze horses, given to the Gallery by Mrs. Lessing J. (Edith G.) Rosenwald. *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* remains one of the best-loved sculptures of all time. This publication sheds new light on the wax original of that work—the only version Degas himself ever touched—together with many other sculptures in which he transformed his observations and experiments into three-dimensional works of art.

The catalogue links art and science, bringing together the insights of a distinguished art historian of 19th-century painting and sculpture and the specialized knowledge of National Gallery conservators and scientists who have published pioneering technical studies. Including essays on Degas' life and work, his sculptural technique and materials, and the story of the sculptures after his death, it features art-historical and technical discussions of every work in the collection as well as indispensable concordances and bibliography. The richly illustrated text is intended for both art lover and specialist.

"Our satisfaction at owning these works is matched by our good fortune in engaging experts of this caliber to study and write about them, devoting years of extensive research to the art, history, and techniques of the Degas sculptures," says Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The comprehensive reach of their work offers readers and viewers the opportunity to experience, as Paul Mellon did, the grace and honesty of these moving figures from modern life."

Edgar Degas in the Gallery's Collection

The National Gallery of Art claims one of the finest and most diverse collections of works by Degas in the world. In addition to the 52 original sculptures, the collection contains 19 paintings and 71 works on paper. A keen observer of contemporary Paris in the street, café, theater, and concert hall, Degas often depicted popular modern forms of entertainment such as the ballet and the racetrack—both of which are explored across a variety of media in the Gallery's holdings. As an artist, Degas defies easy description—he belonged to the rare breed equally interested in painting and sculpture

and equally talented at both. Allied with the French impressionists through his commitment to portraying modern life, he also took an independent course, preferring line over color and the visible brushstroke, and working in a studio instead of out-of-doors.

Sculptures

More than 100 original sculptures by Degas—of dancers, horses, and bathers—were found in his studio and apartment after he died, all dusty, some fallen apart. The artist formed most from either wax or nondrying modeling clays. The waxes are beeswax incorporated with starch and fats or resins and pigment; the modeling clays are most often the nondrying clays made from zinc oxide and oleic acid with sulfur and clay, while a few are made from traditional water-based modeling clay. Degas usually built his own armatures from wires, wood, and metal pins, and formed the sculptures over these as well as fillers he had at hand: cork stoppers, paper, rope, rags, and even discarded objects such as the lid of a salt shaker.

For nearly 40 years after his death, these figures were known only through the bronzes his heirs had cast from the originals. Then, in 1955, the sculpture formed by Degas' own hands (the lifetime works) appeared on the art market. Thanks to the discernment and generosity of Paul Mellon, the majority are now preserved at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Fifty lifetime works (and ten posthumous casts) are currently on view in the West Building Ground Floor Sculpture Galleries, including his iconic *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Executed in wax, near life-sized, dressed in a ballerina's tutu, with real ballet slippers and real hair, the sculpture caused a sensation when it was exhibited in 1881. It is the only sculpture Degas ever showed publicly.

Paintings

The Gallery's collection of paintings covers virtually the entire range of Degas' career, beginning with early works, notably the 1855 portrait of his brother *René de Gas* (one of the first known canvases by Degas) and continuing through to the late ballet paintings, such as *Before the Ballet* (1890/1892). Portraiture is a particular strength of the Gallery's holdings, with eight works in which the Degas family figures prominently,

including the early *Self-Portrait with a White Collar* (c. 1857). Key milestones in the artist's professional career are also represented, among them *Madame Camus* (1869/1870), the last work the artist ever showed at the Paris Salon, and *The Dance Lesson* (c. 1879), which he exhibited in the fifth impressionist exhibition in 1880.

The Gallery also owns two of the artist's most important masterpieces—*Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* (1866, reworked 1880–1881 and c. 1897) and *Four Dancers* (c. 1899). Created for the Paris Salon of 1866, *Scene from the Steeplechase* is the artist's first significant depiction of modern life. It is also a painting that haunted the artist who refused to part with it, reworking it repeatedly over the course of decades. The equally monumental *Four Dancers* is one of the artist's largest depictions of the ballet and his culminating masterpiece on the subject.

Works on Paper

The collection also includes a substantial number of works on paper by Degas, consisting of 33 drawings, watercolors, and pastels, and 38 etchings, drypoints, aquatints, lithographs, and monotypes. These works span the course of Degas' career, from his earliest copies made as a student to his late, boldly abstracted pastels. All of Degas' major themes—such as ballet, horseracing, portraiture, and female nudes—are well represented, with several of the most impressive pieces, such as *The Curtain* (c. 1880) and *Ballet Scene* (c. 1907) focusing on dance subjects. Among a number of studies of horses and jockeys are several for the central figure in the Gallery's painting *The Fallen Jockey*. Many of the prints record Degas' experiments with various etching media and his explorations of the rich possibilities of monotype, in which he brushed ink directly onto a copper plate, worked the wet medium with a variety of brushes and tools—including his fingers—and then printed just one or two impressions. A particularly beautiful example of his skill in this challenging technique is *Woman by a Fireplace* (1880/1890). Among Degas' most poignant and personal works are several portraits and self-portraits in a variety of techniques.

Works on paper not on display may be viewed and studied by appointment in the Gallery's Print Study Rooms by qualified scholars and students in accordance with the Gallery's rules and requirements. To make an appointment to view prints or drawings,

please telephone (202) 842-6380.

The Catalogue

This volume is unique among National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogues. It provides a detailed account of all works in the collection by one artist, Degas, in a single artistic category, sculpture. Its authors are from a variety of disciplines: in addition to an art historian, there are two conservators and three scientists. Together they confront many questions and issues regarding Degas and his sculpture.

The art-historical analysis places the sculpture within the discourse on Degas' life and two-dimensional work that has dominated some of the most significant recent writing on modern art and life in 19th-century Paris. Discussions also consider this material as sculpture—an art form with a distinct history, standards, and formal qualities—as well as the role of craft and materiality in Degas' work. The resulting text offers a great deal of new data but also presents dialogue, even debate, among the volume's authors, since so much about Degas' art and life remains speculative or open to interpretation.

The opening biographical and critical essay ("Edgar Degas: His Life and Work") is followed by a study of the posthumous history of Degas' lifetime works and the casts produced from them ("Degas' Sculpture After His Death"), both written by art historian Suzanne Glover Lindsay, adjunct associate professor in the history of art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Technical studies of the lifetime works and the bronzes ("Degas the Sculptor and His Technique" and "Degas' Bronzes Analyzed") were coauthored by two conservators at the National Gallery: Shelley G. Sturman, head of object conservation, and Daphne S. Barbour, senior object conservator. An essay on the findings of the scientific analyses of the lifetime works ("Surface and Form: The Effect of Degas' Sculptural Materials") was coauthored by three members of the National Gallery's scientific research department: Barbara H. Berrie, senior conservation scientist; Suzanne Quillen Lomax, organic chemist; and Michael Palmer, conservation scientist.

How to Order

The volume, produced by the National Gallery of Art, is distributed by Princeton

University Press. *Edgar Degas Sculpture*, a hardcover volume containing 408 pages, 209 halftones, and 221 color illustrations, is available for purchase through the National Gallery of Art Shops for \$99. To order, please visit the Gallery Shops website at <http://shop.nga.gov>; call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; fax (202) 789-3047; or e-mail mailorder@nga.gov.

Lectures

Celebrating the publication of *Edgar Degas Sculpture*, Barbour, Lindsay, and Sturman will discuss their extensive research on the art, history, and techniques of Degas' sculptures in a free public lecture in the East Building Auditorium at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, January 30. A book signing will follow.

Two Monday afternoon **works in progress** lectures will each be presented at 12:10 and 1:10 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium. On February 7, Barbour discusses *Degas the Sculptor and His Technique*; Sturman presents *Degas' Bronzes Analyzed* on February 14.

Lectures are free of charge, with seating available on a first-come, first-served basis.

The National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogues

Edgar Degas Sculpture brings to 19 the number of Systematic Catalogues released by the National Gallery of Art. Other volumes in the series and their publication dates are:

French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century, 2009

Renaissance Medals: Volume I, Italy, 2007

Renaissance Medals: Volume II, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and England, 2007

Flemish Paintings of the Seventeenth Century, 2005

Italian Paintings of the Fifteenth Century, 2003

European Sculpture of the Nineteenth Century, 2000

French Paintings of the Nineteenth Century, Part I: Before Impressionism, 2000

American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century, Part II, 1998

Decorative Arts, Part II: Far Eastern Ceramics and Paintings; Persian and Indian Rugs and Carpets, 1998

American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century, Part I, 1996

Italian Paintings of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, 1996

American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century, 1995

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century, 1995

Western Decorative Arts, Part I: Medieval, Renaissance, and Historicizing Styles including Metalwork, Enamels, and Ceramics, 1993

German Paintings of the Fifteenth through Seventeenth Centuries, 1993

American Naive Paintings, 1992

British Paintings of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries, 1992

Spanish Paintings of the Fifteenth through Nineteenth Centuries, 1990

Early Netherlandish Painting, 1986

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on [Twitter](http://twitter.com/ngadc) at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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