



Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
L: *Spanish Dance*, Mid 1880's
Bronze
R: *Dancers in Pink*, c. 1886
Pastel on paper, mounted on cardboard
28-1/2 x 15-1/4 in. (72.4 x 38.7 cm)

With 72 sculptures and dozens of paintings, drawings and pastels, the Norton Simon has one of the largest collections of works by Edgar Degas in the world. Degas was a founding member of the Impressionists, but he did not share his contemporary Claude Monet's interest in depicting the passing effects of light outdoors. Instead he captured the moment by depicting modern life, including racehorses, laundresses, milliners, and especially ballerinas, in innovative ways. Above all he was interested in depicting the fleeting effects of movement.

Degas was a master painter and worked extensively with pastels, but his sculptures were less known during his lifetime. With the exception of his original wax version of the *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* (which is now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), his sculptures were never exhibited during his lifetime. In many cases, they served primarily as studies of movement that complemented and informed his paintings and drawings. As Degas explained to a friend, making sculptures gave his "paintings and drawings greater expression, greater ardor and more life." He did not identify as a sculptor and he never sold any sculptures, but by the late 1880's his eyesight had begun to fail and he increasingly turned to sculpture as a more tactile medium. When Degas died in 1917, his art dealer Joseph Durand-Ruel noted more than 150 pieces of sculpture scattered throughout his studio.

After Degas' death, his heirs authorized the casting of the best preserved of these sculptures in high quality bronze by the Hébrard foundry. The Norton Simon Museum bronzes are the master bronzes (modèles) from which all subsequent bronzes were cast; they are the only bronzes made from molds taken from the original waxes. All subsequent sculptures were made from molds taken from the modèles instead of the waxes and do not retain the same level of detail.



Dancers in the Wings, 1876-1878
Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Pastel, gouache, distemper, and "essence" on paper, mounted on board
27-1/4 x 19-3/4 in. (69.2 x 50.2 cm)

Documenting Dancers

In the course of his career, Edgar Degas created more than 600 artworks related to dance. Attending the ballet was a popular pastime in 19th century Paris and a favorite subject of collectors, but Degas's depictions of dancers differed from those of his contemporaries. He used this popular subject to experiment with new materials, dynamic perspectives and novel **compositions**.

Key Concepts

- Degas's innovative **compositions** were influenced by **Japanese prints**. Here the figure on the left is partially blocked by the figure on the right who is cut in half by the right edge of the **composition**. As is typical of many **Japanese print** compositions, the floor is tilted upwards and the **composition** is asymmetrical.
- Degas said that "no art is less spontaneous than mine" and he was known to depict the same subject many times, making slight alterations, and carefully arranging the figures and **compositions**, only to re-work them later. *Dancers in the Wings* began with just the dancer in pink and then gradually expanded outwards. Degas eventually added nine strips of paper to the outer edges of the initial sheet of paper to enlarge his initial **composition** to include the second dancer as well as space above and below the dancers.
- This scene is typical of Degas's interest in the backstage and daily, exhausting work of the dancers. He had occasional access to the wings at the Paris Opéra, and he frequently observed classes and rehearsals. Rather than highlighting the dancers' grace, he shows them as hard-working young girls. Here he depicts the transition between the dancers' colorful and glamorous existence on stage and their life behind the scenes. We see the dancers in a private moment, waiting before their entrance onto the stage.

A Closer Look at *Dancers in the Wings*

- The dancer in pink leans on the plain, unpainted back of the stage set, and only a narrow corner of the colorful scenery on stage can be seen behind her. This partial view, along with the cropping of the second dancer, gives the impression that the viewer is in the wings with the dancers at close range. The viewer sees only what another dancer or observer standing with them in that tight space might see.
- The costumes in this picture come from a specific ballet, *La Source*, performed at the Paris Opéra the year Degas began this **pastel**. In the first act of the ballet, two ballerinas dressed as butterflies, like the dancer to the right, dance with eight dancers dressed as flowers, like the dancer in pink.

- Degas frequently experimented with materials, but this piece is among his most technically sophisticated works. Here he combined a variety of **pastels** and paints, which he stumped, moistened and brushed onto the paper to create the contrasting textures of wood, skin, ornament and airy tutus.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Degas chose to expand this piece from a single dancer in pink, to a larger **composition** with more empty space and another dancer? How does expanding the artwork change the focus of the piece and affect how you, the viewer, relate to it? How would it change if Degas had included all of the dancer on the right?
- Why do you think Degas would choose to show the dancers backstage as opposed to dancing onstage?

Activity

- Experiment with some of the materials Degas used for this piece like **pastel** and gouache or a similar variety of materials (for example, colored pencil, **pastel**, oil pastel, etc). Why and how do you think Degas chose to use all of these materials in this piece? Inspired by this piece, create your own multimedia artwork using a variety of materials to create different effects for different elements in the **composition**.

Vocabulary

- **Composition:** the overall arrangement of the different parts and elements of an artwork.
- **Impressionism:** a movement or style of painting that originated in the 1860s in France, characterized by the use of unmixed colors and small brushstrokes to capture the effects of light and create an “impression” of the subject matter at a given moment.
- **Japanese prints:** In 1853, Japan’s isolationist policy came to an end when its ports were forcibly opened to the outside world. A flood of Japanese exports entered Europe, and Japanese woodblock prints were very popular and had a dramatic influence upon European artists.
- **Pastels:** crayons made of powdered pigments mixed bound with gum or resin.



Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen, 1878–81
Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Bronze
37-5/8 x 13-3/16 x 9-15/16 in. (95.6 x 33.5 x 25.2 cm)

The Exception

The original wax version of *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, which is now part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was the only one of Degas's sculptures to be exhibited during his lifetime. Degas's model, Marie von Goethem, was a student of the Ballet de l'Opéra where Degas often sketched classes and rehearsals, and she repeatedly came to his studio to pose for him. He made numerous drawings of her from different angles in preparation for this sculpture.

Key Concepts

- Degas's sculptures were made with a variety of materials, but most of the sculptures that survive today—including the model for *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*— were made from beeswax, a common modeling material for artists, in combination with other materials found around the artist's home for filler and structure.
- Many of the dancers at the Ballet de l'Opéra came from poor backgrounds and submitted themselves to years of rigorous training in hopes of becoming a star ballerina. As a frequent visitor to classes and rehearsals, Degas witnessed firsthand the harsh realities of the dancer's life.
- The sculpture's realism caused an uproar at the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition in 1881. Critics called the dancer a scrawny savage and a slouching adolescent, and some claimed the sculpture belonged in a museum of anthropology rather than an art exhibit.

A Closer Look at *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*

- The *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* is Degas's largest and most ambitious ballet sculpture. The original wax had an internal **armature** of pipes, wire, and other materials, including rope and paintbrushes. To make it more life-like, the sculpture was dressed with real ballet shoes, a cotton bodice, a tulle tutu and a silk ribbon tied around a braided wig made from real hair.
- Realistic texture was very important to Degas, and the **bronze** preserves this detail. The Norton Simon's *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* wears a real tutu and silk hair ribbon, and it retains many of the textural details of the hair and bodice.
- Degas depicted the dancer in relaxed fourth position, a pose that dance students would assume during a moment of rest in class or between movements in a ballet. Her eyes are half closed, and yet she seems at attention, ready to begin dancing again when called upon.

Discussion Questions

- How would you describe this sculpture? Are you surprised to learn that this sculpture upset many of Degas's contemporaries? What do you think it is about this sculpture that has stood the test of time and appealed to so many museum visitors?
- Compare this sculpture with another picture or sculpture of dancers by Degas at the Museum. How is *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* similar and different from these other depictions of dancers?

Activity

- Degas was among the first of a long line of painters to explore sculpture. Notably, Pablo Picasso would later make his own sculptures from unconventional materials found around his home, like his [children's toys](#). Looking closely at the variety of textures Degas achieved in this sculpture, create your own sculpture with unconventional materials that add textural variety.

Vocabulary

- **Bronze casting:** a process in which a ceramic cast is made from a wax model. The mold is baked, the wax melts out of the mold, and heated liquid bronze is poured into it. When the bronze cools and hardens, the mold is broken away and the bronze is filed down and polished.
- **Armature:** a framework around which a sculpture is built, providing structure and stability to the sculpture.



Horse Clearing an Obstacle, 1881–1890
Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Bronze
11-7/8 x 16-1/2 x 9-5/8 in. (30.2 x 42.0 x 24.4 cm)

Revealing the Mystery of Motion

In the second half of the 19th century horse racing became one of the most popular spectator sports in France. Degas depicted racing scenes throughout his career. He visited the racetrack and attended country hunts on horseback, and he visited museums to study paintings of horses. However, for a time, Degas struggled to understand their movements and, specifically, how a horse's legs are positioned when it jumps or trots. His explorations in sculpture as well as innovations by photographers like **Eadweard Muybridge** contributed to his growing understanding and skill depicting horses.

Key Concepts

- Degas initially used wooden horses or chessmen to plan his equestrian paintings and drawings. He used them to arrange the horses in the picture and see how the light would fall on the horses. Later on, he frequently used his own waxes as models.
- Part of his attraction to the subject of horses, as well as dancers, was the opportunity to study movement and the tension of muscles. In this sculpture, as in most of his sculptures of horses, Degas depicts a lean, highly disciplined racehorse in action.
- Before photographer **Eadweard Muybridge** invented **mechanical shutters** and quickened his camera speed, photographs took so long to expose that any movement by the subject would result in a blurry photograph. However, with his improvements to the camera, **Muybridge** was able to capture a horse's every step and, in doing so, show precisely how a horse's legs are positioned when he runs and jumps. Scholars disagree about Degas's use of **Muybridge's** photos, but most believe Degas used them as a reference for his work.

A Closer Look at *Horse Clearing an Obstacle*

- This is Degas's only known sculpture to suggest a jumping horse, although the horse has no rider. Its pose is similar to that of the horse in **Muybridge's** photograph *"Daisy" Jumping a Hurdle, Saddled, Preparing for the Leap*.
- While Degas used some ready-made armatures to stabilize his sculptures, he made many of his own so he would be able to continuously adjust them to modify his figures and their poses. The armature of the wax sculpture from which this specific bronze was cast, was designed by Degas to allow him to adjust and readjust the height of the horse's chest and legs.
- Degas's surface details from the original wax are visible in the bronze. Degas marked the left side of the horse's mouth to give the appearance of teeth gritted with exertion, and, along the right side of the horse's neck, wax strips were pressed diagonally to suggest a mane moving backwards as the horse leaps forward. Both details contribute to the impression of movement.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think artists depicted a horse mid-jump before the invention of the instantaneous photos of **Muybridge**? Compare this sculpture to a painted depiction of a horse jumping from before the 19th century. What changes, if any do you notice?
- Compare this sculpture to the *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*. *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* is very finished compared to Degas's much rougher and more simplified sculptures of horses in motion. What do you think the relative amount of detail in each tells us about the possible purpose of each sculpture?

Activity

- Use a posed wooden figure manikin to create a composition of figures in motion. How naturalistic can you make your drawing without using real models?

Vocabulary

- **Eadweard Muybridge:** this photographer's pioneering stop-motion photographs, published and sold beginning in the late 1870s, revealed details of animal and human movement that upended long-held theories and helped artists in their attempt to accurately depict horses and people in motion.
- **Mechanical shutters:** in photography, a shutter is a device that allows light to pass for a determined period, exposing photographic film to light in order to capture a permanent image of a scene. The invention of the mechanical shutter, as opposed to a slower manual one, exposed the film to light for a shorter period of time, thus enabling photographs to capture motion without blurring.



Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot, 1900-1910
Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Bronze
18-1/4 x 7-1/4 x 11 in. (46.4 x 18.4 x 28.0 cm)

Looking Back

Late in his career, Degas created many images of dancers and bathers. He would often experiment with the same pose in painting and in sculpture, making slight adjustments, or (in paintings and drawings) changing the angle or perspective from which it was depicted. Around 1900, Degas permitted a few of his sculptures to be cast in plaster to be displayed in his apartment among works by other sculptors from his collection. *Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot* was one of those sculptures, and the plaster cast appears in photos taken of the artist's apartments after his death.

Key Concepts

- Because many of the figures in Degas's sculptures are nudes, it is difficult to distinguish between bathers and dancers unless they either are in a recognizable dance position or in the tub. Some scholars have compared this sculpture's pose to that of classical sculptures of the ancient Greek goddesses Nike or Aphrodite adjusting their sandal or nursing a wounded foot.
- Degas is reported to have said "One must repeat the same subject ten times, a hundred times" in order to master it. Always reluctant to sell his work, he frequently used his drawings and sculptures as references for new works. In all, there are six sculptures with a pose similar to the one portrayed in this sculpture among the Degas bronzes, although none are as highly **finished** as this one.
- In addition to the sculptures, there are also at least three drawings of bathers in similar poses as well as numerous depictions of dancers adjusting their shoes, as in *Dancers in the Wings*.



A Closer Look at *Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot*

- Compared to similar sculptures of this pose, this piece is highly **finished** and smooth with surface details from the original wax still noticeable in the figure's torso, the details of her toes, and her hair.
- This is an example of **sculpture in the round**. The twisting motion of the pose invites viewers to walk around the sculpture, and there is no clear front or back. The lack of balance suggests that the model's left hand likely held on to a support of some kind which was not included in Degas's sculpture.
- As with most of Degas's sculptures, the face is only generally indicated, and the figure looks down and back without acknowledging the viewer.

Discussion Questions

- Looking at the photograph of the sculpture as compared to the sculpture itself, what is lost in translating something three-dimensional into a two-dimensional form like photography? What are the challenges of depicting a three-dimensional object in two-dimensional form?
- Compare this picture to one of Degas's paintings or drawings of dancers and bathers. What do they have in common? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of each medium?

Activity

- Sit in a circle around a model or figurine posed dynamically in the center of your classroom. Then create a 20-minute pencil drawing of the model from where you are sitting. When the drawing is finished, use sculpting clay to make a **sculpture in the round** of the model. Finally, create one final drawing of the model. Then come together as class. How do you feel about drawing vs. sculpture after completing this activity? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each medium? How did your understanding of the subject and how you depicted it change after drawing and sculpting it?

Vocabulary

- **Finish:** the characteristics of a surface; the exterior texture of a sculpture.
- **Sculpture in the round:** a freestanding sculpture, not attached to any surface other than its base; a sculpture that one can move around and view from all angles.