

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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EXHIBITION OF MASTERWORKS HONORS PAUL MELLON'S
LEGACY OF GIFTS TO THE NATION;
INCLUDES 14 RARE DEGAS WAXES

Washington, D.C. – French, British, and American paintings, sculpture, drawings, watercolors, and prints are included in a memorial exhibition highlighting the gifts and bequests of Paul Mellon (1907–1999), one of the founding benefactors of the National Gallery of Art and its most generous donor. An Enduring Legacy: Masterpieces from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon presents eighty-nine works, including fourteen rare waxes by Degas. It is on view in the East Building of the National Gallery from November 7, 1999 through February 27, 2000.

“This exhibition honors Paul Mellon, whose generosity and service to the nation are unsurpassed,” said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. “The full breadth of Mr. Mellon’s gifts can be seen abundantly in the galleries throughout the museum. A selection of the most significant works is on view in the exhibition, and as suggested by Mr. Mellon, special focus is given to the work of Degas—his favorite artist—including an extraordinary group of waxes, the only works of sculpture hand-modeled by the artist.”

A variety of different themes in Degas’ work—bathers, dancers, and horses and riders—is represented in the section devoted to the artist, and encompasses works of sculpture, paintings, prints, drawings, and pastels. Included is the masterpiece Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old (both wax and plaster versions); the monumental painting Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey (1866; reworked 1880-1881 and c. 1897), along with a related group of drawings of horses and jockeys; and the important painting Woman Viewed from Behind, probably a portrait of Mary Cassatt visiting the Louvre in Paris, on view with a related etching of the same subject, a study for the etching, and the etched copper plate itself. Many of these works were part of Mellon's final gift of seventy-three paintings, works of sculpture, and drawings received in 1999.

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Stellar impressionist and post-impressionist paintings that are on view include Edouard Manet's Plum Brandy (c.1877), Georges Seurat's The Lighthouse at Honfleur (1886), Claude Monet's Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son (1875), Paul Cézanne's Boy in a Red Waistcoat (1888–1890), and Mary Cassatt's Little Girl in a Blue Armchair (1878). Outstanding works by recognized masters of British and American art include George Stubbs' White Poodle in a Punt (c.1780), George Bellows' New York (1911), and Winslow Homer's The Dinner Horn (Blowing the Horn at Seaside) (1870).

Among the major drawings are J.M.W. Turner's A Yorkshire River (1827), Vincent van Gogh's Harvest—The Plain of La Crau (1888), several works by Paul Cézanne including an intact artist's sketchbook, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's Seated Woman from Behind—Study for "Au Moulin Rouge" (1892), Fashionable People at Les Ambassadeurs (1893), and significant watercolors by Maurice Prendergast and Winslow Homer, as well as Mary Cassatt's pastel The Black Hat (1890).

Paul Mellon, along with his sister Ailsa Mellon Bruce, represented the second generation of major benefactors to the National Gallery of Art. They were the son and daughter of English-born Nora McMullen and Pittsburgh industrialist and financier Andrew W. Mellon. Andrew W. Mellon founded the National Gallery of Art in 1937 and donated his famous art collection to the country, as well as funds for the construction of the West Building and an endowment.

Born in 1907, Paul Mellon began collecting art in earnest in his early forties with his second wife, "Bunny," the former Rachel Lambert Lloyd. During his lifetime, he gave more than 913 works to the Gallery including important French impressionist, post-impressionist, and American works of art. Paul Mellon also generously supported the museum in other ways. He led the Gallery in developing the East Building (opened in 1978), which he, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded. He also helped establish and generously supported the Patrons' Permanent Fund, an endowment for the purchase of works of art, and provided funding for other purposes. Renowned as a philanthropist, art collector, patron of the arts, and horse breeder, Paul Mellon died on February 1, 1999, at Oak Spring, his home in Upperville, Virginia, at the age of 91.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, which will be the sole venue for the showing.

The National Gallery of Art, located on the National Mall at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information, call (202) 737-4215; call the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176; or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at www.nga.gov. To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

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Washington, D.C.

THE DEGAS WAXES

c. 1870 – c. 1911

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

"It is the movement of people and things that distracts and even consoles. . .," Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917) wrote in 1886. "If the leaves of the trees did not move, how sad the trees would be, and we too."¹ Throughout most of his career, he produced sculpture in the privacy of his studio, but rarely exhibited it. This testifies to the fascination and consolation he found in intensive study of the movement of living beings.

As in his paintings, pastels, and prints, Degas' principal subjects came from his immediate, late nineteenth-century Parisian world. They are race horses, jockeys, dancers, and nude women bathing or grooming themselves. Yet only a few works of sculpture, notably the *Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old*, represent figures from contemporary Paris with the painstaking naturalism that was part of his jarring modernity. Even though Degas was a brilliant portraitist, relatively few of his sculptures are portraits.² In sculpture, with a few exceptions, he concerned himself less with the details that define the individual than with the form as a whole. He posed his figures in attitudes that achieve a rare synthesis between directly observed actions and motifs derived from the old masters. Thus his statuettes, immediate as their poses may look, frequently recall the ancient, Renaissance, and Far Eastern works that Degas admired and carefully studied. Above all he grappled with the problem of representing a figure in motion, explored from every angle, piercing space and penetrated by it in a configuration that implies imminent change. The spaces shaped by the limbs, changing as one moves around a figure, become as fascinating as the solid forms.

The process of sculpture excited Degas far more than the result. This is evident in these rough, willfully unfinished surfaces; almost all retain the abstract quality of sketches. He strove endlessly to perfect his orchestration of a movement, and often reworked a statuette until it fell to pieces. Experimenting freely just as he did with new methods for painting and printmaking, he devised his own mixtures of pigmented wax, plastilene (nondrying modeling clay), and

¹ Letter of 1886, in Richard Kendall, ed., *Degas by Himself* (London, 1987), 209 – 210. See also Charles Millard, *The Sculpture of Edgar Degas* (Princeton, 1976), 86 – 87.

² On Degas' portrait sculpture see John Rewald, *Degas: Sculpture* (New York, 1956), 147 – 148; Millard 1976, 10 – 14, and Jean Sutherland Boggs, ed., *Degas* [exh. cat. Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais] (Paris, 1988), 455 – 456.

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other substances such as fats and starch. He applied these over armatures of flexible wire and rope, supported by a vertical shaft anchored in the wooden base and often external to the figure. Some limbs are stiffened with nails, brush handles, or matchsticks, and he frequently added corks to the wax for lightness and bulk. This method suited him because, even if the unstable materials easily crumbled or collapsed, they afforded the freedom he prized to revise again and again.³

From at least as early as 1870, Degas modeled in wax, devoting increasing attention to it in his last twenty years, as his vision deteriorated.⁴ Beginning with horses, he claimed to have taken up modeling statuettes as an aid to working out poses and movements in his paintings.⁵ But his sculpture quickly took on a life of its own. Even more self-critical in this pursuit than in his two-dimensional works, he exhibited only one sculpture during his lifetime, the *Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old*, in the sixth impressionist exhibition in April 1881. Critical reception ranged from profound admiration to fury and disgust. Probably less for this reason than because the process of bringing the *Little Dancer's* highly naturalistic style to perfection took so long, Degas kept the rest of his sculpture private. Working at it for his own stimulation and exploration, not for an audience, he showed it only to the friends and colleagues who were admitted to his studio. Nor would he permit it to be cast in a material other than plaster, and then in only four cases. He held out to the end against commitment to bronze, "that material for eternity."⁶ But he carefully preserved his favorite waxes under glass vitrines and continued to model statuettes until 1912, when a forced move from his familiar studio in the rue Victor Massé precipitated his final decline.

The famous bronzes cast from Degas' waxes were produced after his death by the founder A.-A. Hébrard in an arrangement with the Degas heirs. Of about 150 waxes that his dealer Durand-Ruel remembered finding, in widely varying condition, in Degas' studio in 1917, 74 were ultimately cast; many others must have fallen to pieces before and after his death. Before being cast the waxes were repaired and the armatures and bases trimmed, sometimes reinforced and sometimes replaced, probably with participation by Degas' sculptor friend Albert Bartholomé. Seventy-three chosen waxes were then cast in bronze, beginning in 1919, in editions planned to number at least 23 each, by the Italian expert Albino Palazzolo (the seventy-fourth, *The Schoolgirl*, was cast

³ On his sculptural practices see Rewald 1956, 25 – 28; Millard 1976, 35 – 39; John McCarty, "A Sculptor's Thoughts on the Degas Waxes," *In Honor of Paul Mellon, Collector and Benefactor*, ed. John Wilmerding (Washington, 1986), 217 – 225, and *Sculptures en cire de l'ancienne Egypte à l'art abstrait* (Paris, 1987), 225 – 237.

⁴ On the impact of his lifelong visual problems on Degas' work see Richard Kendall, "Degas and the Contingency of Vision," *Burlington Magazine* 130 (1988), 180 – 197.

⁵ Degas implied this in an 1897 conversation recalled by François Thiébaud-Sisson in 1921; translation in Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, eds., *Degas. Form and Space* [exh. cat. Centre Culturel du Marais] (Paris, 1984), 179.

⁶ On the plaster casts and Degas' reluctance to cast in bronze see Millard 1976, 30.

later, sometime before 1955). The process Palazzolo used to make molds from the waxes left all but four of the fragile originals preserved. They were returned to Hébrard's cellar, not to emerge until after the Second World War. Restored further by Palazzolo, 69 original waxes were first exhibited as a group in 1955, at the Knoedler Gallery in New York. In 1956 they were all purchased by Paul Mellon.⁷

The bronzes today are widely known in public and private collections. Their brilliant compositions prompted even Degas' friend Mary Cassatt, who had initially opposed their casting, to write: "I believe [Degas] will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter."⁸

Yet Degas never saw the bronzes. The only works of sculpture he produced with his own hands are the waxes and only these show the full extent of his sculptural genius. The improvised armatures, poking through the wax or visible in x-rays, reveal the "drawing in space" that underlies the figures. The direct work of the artist's hands appears with fresh immediacy, smoothing some areas to the look of polished wood, building up others with bits of wax slapped on in a rough, scaly texture that leaves the edges of each fragment visible. Vaguely suggested forms contrast with delicate hints of facial features or anatomical detail. Only the waxes reveal the softly organic substance, its unique response to light, and the varied colors and textures of Degas' revolutionary assemblage of objects and material. Although the waxes were known to few artists before 1955, this mixture of real and represented objects foreshadowed twentieth-century approaches to art.

Also evident only in the original waxes is the essential role played by Degas' armatures and bases. He showed a lifelong preoccupation with the figure's relationship to the earth, its struggle against gravity for freedom and balance. In a few cases the armatures do not merely support a figure but seem to suspend it in the air, long before mobiles like those of Calder were conceived. These effects are lost in the bronze casts. Moreover many of the sculptures began with a wooden base that defined the ground above which the figure acts and also the spatial environment it charges with its movement. Some bases are multilayered constructions. Several have strips added at the ends to extend

⁷ A seventieth sculpture, *The Schoolgirl*, was not in the 1955 exhibition but was purchased separately by Mr. Mellon, also from Knoedler, in 1958. On the casting process and adjustments to the waxes see Jean Adhémar, "Before the Degas Bronzes," *Art News* 54 (November 1955), 34 – 35, 70; Rewald 1956; Millard 1976, 25 – 39, esp. 37 n. 54; Patricia Failing, "The Degas Bronzes Degas Never Knew," *Art News* 78 (April 1979), 38 – 41; Patricia Failing, "Cast in Bronze: the Degas Dilemma," *Art News* 87 (January 1988), 136 – 141; and Gary Tinterow in Paris 1988, 609 – 610. Archival photos of several waxes, taken before casting and showing the original forms of some armatures and bases, are published in Paul Gsell, "Edgar Degas, Statuaire," *La Renaissance de l'Art français et des Industries de Luxe* (December 1918), 373 – 378; Paul-André Lemoisne, "Les statuettes de Degas," *Art et Décoration* (Sept. – Oct. 1919), 109 – 117; Pierre Borel, *Les sculptures inédites de Degas – choix de cires originales* (Geneva, 1949; some armatures deleted), and Rewald 1944. For a full publication of the early photos see now Anne Pingot, *Degas Sculptures* (Paris, 1991).

⁸ Letters quoted by John Rewald in *The Complete Sculptures of Degas* [exh. cat. Lefevre Gallery] (London, 1976), 3.

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them, recalling the strips of paper Degas often added to expand the composition of a pastel. The dimensions of a base and a figure's orientation and movement in relation to it were evidently part of Degas' developing conception. It is true that changes in the bases and armatures, made after the artist's death, must be considered in each case. But the evidence of early photographs and of the waxes themselves take us far toward an understanding of the brilliant uses Degas made of these elements.⁹

A total of sixty-nine works of sculpture from Degas' hands survive.¹⁰ Sixty-six are mostly of wax and plastilene, three of indefinable matter containing plaster. Today these original works can be seen in only four museums in the world: the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (five works); the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (three works); the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (nine works) and the National Gallery of Art, Washington. In all cases these museum holdings result from the generosity of Paul Mellon, who donated seventeen waxes, five bronzes, and one plaster to the National Gallery in 1985. The gift of thirty-one additional waxes¹¹ – nearly half the surviving total – in honor of the Gallery's fiftieth anniversary made possible the fullest public installation of Degas waxes anywhere since 1956. The *Little Dancer* appeared in an unprecedented grouping with three closely related works from the 1985 gift: the wax nude study, a bronze cast from that study, and a colored plaster produced in Hébrard's studio from the final 1881 version. These offered insight into the wax's production process, its subsequent history, and the important differences between Degas' original waxes and the casts made from them. The 1999 fulfillment of the promised gift will make these revelations continuously accessible to visitors to the National Gallery of Art.

by Alison Luchs

This introduction, "The Degas Waxes" has been excerpted from Art for the Nation, 1991 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991; it was revised in October 1999.

⁹ See Boggs in Paris 1988, 23 – 26; on the armatures and bases: Millard 1976, 94, 104, McCarty in Mellon 1986, 219 – 223; on the problem of alterations, note 7, above, on expanded paper supports, Paris 1988, 202 – 203.

¹⁰ The census of his surviving sculptures usually includes a seventieth work, a *Torso* cast in plaster at his wish around 1900, of which the wax disappeared before 1919. This plaster is counted among the sixty-nine works in the 1955 Knoedler exhibition, which did not include *The Schoolgirl*.

¹¹ The count of 31 includes two horse and jockey groups. These were each accessioned as a single work in 1999, giving a total of 29 accessioned waxes. In addition Mr. Mellon gave the plaster *Torso* and the three portrait sculptures of indefinable matter containing plaster, exceeding his 1991 promise of original Degas sculptures.

PROVENANCE

Except for *The Schoolgirl*, all the waxes in this group have the same provenance. Found in Degas' studio in 1917, they passed to the artist's heirs and in 1919 to the founder A.-A. Hébrard, thereafter to Hébrard's daughter Nelly, who in 1949 bought the Degas heirs' remaining rights. In 1955 they were placed on consignment with M. Knoedler and Co., New York. Paul Mellon purchased 69 of the waxes in 1956, and *The Schoolgirl* in 1958.

NOTES

The titles used for the waxes today, with the exception of *Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old*, were not devised by Degas. Their English form in most cases originates with John Rewald's *Degas, Works in Sculpture: A Complete Catalogue* (New York and London, 1944), translated with minor changes from the French titles used in the catalogue of the 1921 exhibition of the bronzes. Rewald's titles and Roman numeral catalogue numbers (retained in Rewald, 1956) have become standard.

The dates of the waxes are almost all conjectural. The *Little Dancer* is the best documented. Dates for others have been proposed bases on relationships to other Degas works, clues in correspondence, and reminiscences of friends and models. It is usually uncertain whether Degas made a particular sculpture as a study for a related painting or pastel, or whether work on a two-dimensional image inspired him to continue exploring a movement in three dimensions. He repeated and varied certain poses, often over many years. Besides this he would sometimes put a sculpture aside and return to it later.

It is sometimes argued that his early sculptural style is smoother and more compact, closer to the precision of the *Little Dancer*, and that his treatment grew looser and more expressive in his late years. But certain cases raise the possibility that he worked in more than one manner at the same time. There is also evidence that his earliest sculpted figures are more tranquil and restrained; that they move with increasing freedom after c. 1885, and that in his final years they became heavier and more earthbound.¹²

The "Degas" inscriptions on the waxes are posthumous. Degas would scarcely have added a signature with its implications of completion and an expected audience. Since the stamped inscriptions on the waxes are applied in different places from those on the bronzes, they were probably added to the waxes only in the 1950s, in preparation for the 1955 exhibition.

Materials are described based on observations in Rewald 1956; in Millard, 1976; and by the author. Analysis of each piece to identify components more precisely remains to be undertaken. Heights given exclude the bases.

¹² On stylistic evolution of Degas' sculpture see Rewald 1956, 24 – 25, 140; Millard 1976, 20, 108 – 110; Boggs in Paris 1988, 484, 586. Failing 1988, 138 – 139, stressed the problems of any effort to date the sculptures.

PUBLICATIONS

The study of Degas's sculpture has flourished since the 1991 exhibition of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon's promised gift in the 50th anniversary exhibition for the National Gallery of Art. The following provide particularly important new information.

A complete catalogue including all known early photographs of the waxes with their original bases and armatures was published by Anne Pingeot, Degas sculptures, Paris, 1991. Evidence that many of Degas's original armatures survived into the 1950s, when they were altered by Albino Palazzolo, is discussed by National Gallery of Art object conservator Daphne Barbour in "Degas's wax sculptures from the inside out," The Burlington Magazine 134 (December 1992), pp. 798-805, also including x-rays of several waxes and discussion of their coloring. A further study by Barbour on Degas's working methods is "Degas's Little Dancer: Not Just a Study in the Nude," Art Journal, vol. 54, no. 2 (summer 1995), pp. 28-32.

A highly important publication on Degas sculpture is the August 1995 issue of Apollo. It includes a full catalogue of Degas bronzes by Sara Campbell (pp. 6-48), who proposes that not all the bronzes were cast in editions as numerous as 23. Other major studies in this issue are: "The materials of the sculptor: Degas' techniques," by Shelley Sturman and Daphne Barbour, pp. 49-54; "Authorship and physical evidence; the creative process," by Patricia Failing, pp. 55-59; "The casting of Degas' sculptures: Completing the story," by Anne Pingeot, pp. 60-63. "The morbid content of Degas' sculpture," by Theodore Reff, pp. 64-71, and "'Who said anything about Rodin?' The visibility and contemporary renown of Degas' late sculpture," by Richard Kendall, pp. 72-77, demonstrating that Degas' waxes were more widely known, even in his lifetime, than was previously believed.

The Little Dancer continues to inspire exhibitions and studies. Important among these are Degas and the Little Dancer (exh. cat., Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha), ed. Richard Kendall (New Haven, 1998), with contributions by Douglas Druick and Arthur Beale. New biographical data on Marie van Goethem, the young model who posed for the wax statuette, and her family appears in Martine Kahane, Delphine Pinasa, and Wilfride Piollet, "Enquête sur la Petite Danseuse de quatorze ans de Degas," 48-14, La Revue du Musée d'Orsay 7 (autumn 1998), pp. 48-67. That dancer's skirt is studied in the same journal, with extensive photographs, by Sara Campbell, "Une danseuse et trente tutus," pp. 68-71.

The wax horses are treated by Shelley Sturman and Daphne Barbour, "The Horses in Wax and Bronze," in Degas at the Races, ed. Jean Sutherland Boggs, with contributions by Sturman, Barbour and Kimberly Jones (exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998) (Washington, 1998), pp. 180-207.

The relationship of Degas's sculpture and paintings is further analyzed by Richard Kendall, Degas: beyond impressionism, (exh. cat, the National Gallery, London, and The Art Institute of Chicago, 1996-1997) (New Haven, 1996), pp. 31-55, 254-275.

See also Daphne Barbour and Shelley Sturman, "Degas' women in Washington: Four Case Studies," in From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture, ed. Jackie Heuman, Tate Gallery Conference, September 18-20, 1995, London, 1995, pp.31-38.

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