



Edgar Degas, *Four Dancers*,
c. 1899, oil on canvas, National
Gallery of Art, Chester Dale
Collection



Edgar Degas, *Self-Portrait*
(*Edgar Degas, par lui-même*)
(detail), probably 1857, etching,
National Gallery of Art, Rosen-
wald Collection

1

The Artist at the Ballet

Edgar Degas (1834–1917) lived in Paris, the capital and largest city in France, during an exciting period in the nineteenth century. In this vibrant center of art, music, and theater, Degas attended ballet performances as often as he could. At the Paris Opéra, he watched both grand productions on stage and small ballet classes in rehearsal studios. He filled numerous notebooks with sketches to help him remember details. Later, he referred to his sketches to compose paintings and model sculpture he made in his studio. His penetrating observations of ballet are apparent in his numerous variations on the subject.

2

Off Stage

Degas made more than a thousand drawings, paintings, and sculptures on ballet themes. Most of his works do not show the dancers performing onstage. Instead, they are absorbed in their daily routine of rehearsing, stretching, and resting. Degas admired the ballerinas' work—how they practiced the same moves over and over again to perfect them—and likened it to his approach as an artist.

Four Dancers depicts a moment backstage, just before the curtain rises and a ballet performance begins. The dancers' red-orange costumes stand out against the green scenery. Short, quick strokes of yellow and white paint on their arms and tutus catch light and, along with squiggly black lines around the bodices, convey the dancers' excitement as they await their cues to go onstage.

Here's a mystery. Did Degas depict four different dancers, or is this four views of one dancer? It could be just one ballerina, pivoting in space, shown in the progression of the motion.

"It is essential to do the same subject over and over again, ten times, a hundred times."

Edgar Degas

3

A Dancer's Life

Dance students at the Paris Opéra often came from working-class families. It was an exhausting life: members of the ballet corps rehearsed all day and hoped to dance onstage in the evening. Few of them became star ballerinas.

Marie van Goethem, a student who lived near Degas, posed for *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. The daughter of a tailor and a laundress, she had two sisters who also studied ballet and modeled for Degas. Three years after this sculpture was made, Marie was dismissed from the Opéra because of her low attendance at ballet classes. It is not known what happened to her.

Degas's sculpture also had trouble. Standing almost life-size, it is made of clay and wax. Degas tinted the wax in fleshlike tones and dressed the figure in a ballet costume, with tiny slippers and a wig tied low with a silk ribbon. People were both fascinated and repelled by how lifelike it looked, and they debated whether it was art. Some viewers thought the sculpture was so realistic it belonged in a science museum alongside specimens! After Degas died in 1917, copies of this wax figure were cast in plaster and bronze, and *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* grew in fame around the world.

Try to imitate Marie's pose. The slight sway in her lower back, arms clasped behind her, chin upraised, eyes closed, and legs turned out indicate she is in the casual fourth position, a stance that ballet dancers assume when they are at rest. Instead of depicting the dancer in movement, this sculpture focuses on a psychological state.

"I think with my hands." Edgar Degas

4

Working from the Inside Out

Degas worked on *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* for more than two years. X-radiographs of the sculpture reveal what is inside. The artist began with a metal armature, which serves as a sort of skeletal support. He used wood and material padding to make the thighs, waist, and chest thicker. Next, he wrapped wire and rope around the head, chest, and thighs. To create the arms, he used wire to attach two long paintbrushes to the shoulders. Degas modeled the figure first with clay to define the muscles, and then he modeled the final layer of the sculpture in wax.

Degas had satin slippers, a linen bodice, and a muslin tutu made for the figure. A wig of human hair, braided and tied with a ribbon, completed the illusion. A coat of wax, spread smoothly with a spatula over the surface of the sculpture, gives it an overall waxy look.



Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878–1881, yellow wax, hair, ribbon, linen bodice, satin shoes, muslin tutu, wood base, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

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Balancing Act

Degas was a prolific artist, making more than a thousand paintings. He was admired for his drawing skills, particularly his work in pastels, and he was known for his experimentation with printmaking and photography. Degas's sculpture is a puzzling aspect of his career. His largest figure, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, is the only one he ever publicly exhibited, even though he made hundreds of wax statuettes over four decades. These works, which were discovered in the artist's studio after his death, were posthumously cast in bronze. The National Gallery owns more than fifty of these wax sculptures.

The smaller wax statuettes, such as those shown here, were part of Degas's working process. They essentially serve as three-dimensional sketches that probably helped the artist better understand proportion, poses, balance, and movement of form in space.

Try to imitate the pose

An arabesque is a ballet position in which a dancer balances on one leg while extending the other leg back. At the same time, the dancer stretches his or her arms to the side as a way to provide balance. It's hard to hold this position for a long time! That's because it is part of a continual movement, and Degas is showing just one "paused" moment in time.

Ballet requires focused control and balance, and Degas had to think carefully about weight and balance when he made sculptures. He began by creating an armature,



a framework inside and sometimes outside a work to hold the position. He twisted and bent the wire into the pose he desired. Degas preferred to sculpt with wax that he often combined with a non-drying clay called plastilene. He could easily model and rework the statuettes as much as he wanted, making adjustments to the position. With the armature providing support, Degas was free to experiment with ways to convey the lightness, energy, and motion of a dancer. An active movement, such as the arabesque, makes the space around the sculpture dynamic.

An x-radiograph reveals the metal armature inside the sculpture.

top: X-radiograph image of *Arabesque over the Right Leg, Right Hand near the Ground, Left Arm Outstretched (First Arabesque Penchée)*, X-ray and photograph, Conservation Laboratory, National Gallery of Art

middle: Edgar Degas, *Arabesque over the Right Leg, Right Hand near the Ground, Left Arm Outstretched (First Arabesque Penchée)*, c. 1885/1890, brown wax, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

bottom: Edgar Degas, *Arabesque over the Right Leg, Left Arm in Front*, c. 1885/1890, yellow-brown wax, metal frame, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

