

Degas's *Little Dancer*



National Gallery of Art

October 5, 2014 – January 11, 2015



Fig. 1
Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*
(*Ecole de Danse*), c. 1873,
oil on canvas. Trustees of
the Corcoran Collection
(William A. Clark Collection)



Fig. 2
Edgar Degas, *Dancers at the
Old Opera House*, c. 1877,
pastel over monotype on laid
paper. National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Ailsa Mellon
Bruce Collection

Fig. 3
Edgar Degas, *The Dance Lesson*,
c. 1879, oil on canvas. National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul
Mellon



Little Dancer Aged Fourteen (cover) holds a unique place in the work of Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917). Among the more than one hundred sculptures he created in wax, clay, and other materials, it is the only one he ever chose to exhibit. At least thirty bronze and two plaster versions of it were cast after his death, all of them based on Degas’s original wax-and-clay sculpture – the sole version he ever touched – which is now at the National Gallery of Art. This exhibition places the statuette amid a select group of other works by Degas with ballet subjects from the Gallery’s collections, as well as an oil painting (fig. 1) and a pastel drawing from the Corcoran Collection.

The Paris Opera Ballet fascinated Degas for more than forty years. Descended from an academy established in 1661 by King Louis XIV, it became a leading cultural institution of nineteenth-century France, its audiences packed with the elite of Parisian society. The Opera Ballet offered Degas a contemporary social setting full of brilliant color, elaborate sets, and beautiful costumes; above all it afforded the opportunity to study the human figure in motion. The movements of dancers – modern yet timeless – seemed to him to preserve an ancient Greek ideal of beauty. Regularly attending performances, he also obtained access to the rehearsal rooms, the backstage, and the wings, spaces that would come to dominate his repertoire. Observation at rehearsals, classes, and performances (fig. 2) underlies his portrayals of dancers in a variety of media. He captured their discipline and elegance, but he was equally interested in their offstage moments of rest or exhaustion (fig. 3). He studied dance movements and positions obsessively (fig. 4), kept a collection of props such as tutus and slippers, and regularly brought dancers into his studio to model for him.

The model for *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, Marie Geneviève van Goethem (June 7, 1865 – ?), has been identified through an inscription on a preparatory drawing (fig. 5). Born in Paris to a tailor and laundress from Belgium, she grew up in poor neighborhoods, as did many of the ballet students known as “rats” – slender creatures who scampered in from the alleys. The idea of a street-urchin dancer fascinated Degas so much that



Fig. 4
Edgar Degas, *Dancer Seen from Behind and Three Studies of Feet*, c. 1878, chalk and pastel on blue-gray paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Myron A. Hofer in memory of his mother, Mrs. Charles Hofer



Fig. 5
Edgar Degas, *Four Studies of a Dancer*, c. 1878 – 1881, chalk and charcoal, heightened with gray wash and white, on buff wove paper. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Arts Graphiques, Fonds du Musée d'Orsay. Image: Réunion des Musée Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY (not in exhibition)

he later wrote a sonnet about such a girl, wishing that she might achieve “an illustrious life” without losing a sense of “the race of her street.” Marie was dismissed from the ballet in the summer of 1882, probably after repeated missed rehearsals, and disappears from the records. By contrast, her younger sister Charlotte, who apparently also modeled for Degas, went on to a successful career as a ballerina and teacher. *Little Dancer*, eyes half closed in concentration, represents a girl whose life may hang in the balance between ascent and downward spiral.

Degas devoted years of careful craftsmanship to preparing *Little Dancer* for exhibition; he had initially intended to have it ready for the fifth impressionist exhibition in 1880 but twice postponed displaying the statuette, finally installing it during the second half of the 1881 exhibition. Drawing the dancer at least twenty-six times, from multiple points of view, he modeled her slender form over an armature of metal rods and wires (suggested by a scribble in the upper right of one of his studies, fig. 6, that matches the internal armature revealed in the x-radiograph, fig. 7). Bulking out the figure with wood, rope, and padding, he coated this core with clay and finally with layers of translucent, pigmented wax. The arms were formed separately, incorporating paint brushes to reinforce the wire supporting them (see diagram, fig. 8). He dressed her in a cotton and silk tutu and linen slippers, with a ribbon binding her wig of dark blond human hair. The result, as described by the critic Jules Claretie, was a “strangely attractive, disturbing and unique Naturalism.”¹

The smaller *Study in the Nude of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (fig. 9) was once thought to be a preparatory stage for the dressed statuette. National Gallery of Art conservation research indicates instead that the

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Cited in Charles S. Moffett, ed. *The New Painting, Impressionism, 1874-1886*, San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986; p. 341.

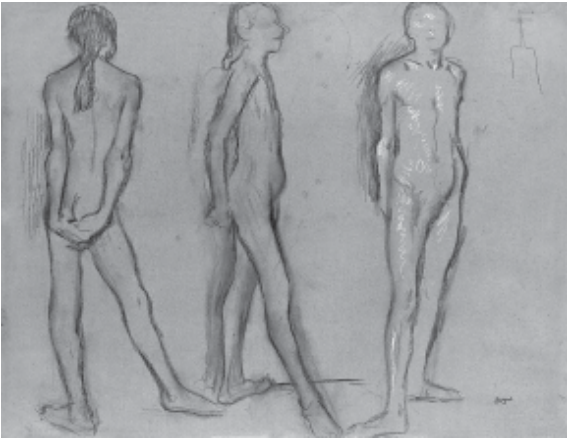


Fig. 6
Edgar Degas, *Three Studies of a Nude Dancer*, c. 1878, charcoal heightened with white chalk on gray wove paper. Private collection (not in exhibition)

Fig. 7
X-radiograph of *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (overall, frontal view)

Fig. 8
Schematic diagram of the internal armature of *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Illustration by Julia Sybalsky and Abigail Mack, 2007







Fig. 9
Edgar Degas, *Study in the Nude of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen (Nude Little Dancer)*, c. 1878 – 1881, pigmented beeswax, plaster core, metal and wood armatures, on plaster and wooden bases. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

nude figure was essentially cast in molds taken from an earlier, lost study in wax or clay, suggesting it is an independent variant of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Degas seems to have worked on both the full-sized version and the smaller surviving nude simultaneously, and may have continued to adjust the nude figure even after the dressed version was exhibited. His change in the position of the right foot, for instance, left an impression still visible in the plaster base.

Beloved today as an image of youthful promise, *Little Dancer* sparked controversy when it appeared in 1881. Sculptures sent to exhibitions were traditionally made of marble, bronze, terracotta, or plaster. For his statuette, Degas picked materials associated with both religious images of the past (lifelike painted and clothed statues of saints) and anthropological displays in museums, where realistic, dressed wax figures were shown in glass cases — as Degas exhibited *Little Dancer* in 1881. Critics responded with excitement to Degas’s sculpture, calling the dancer a “little flower of the gutter,” with the “instinctive ugliness of a face on which all the vices imprint their detestable promises.” But a sympathetic observer, novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, wrote: “The terrible realism of this statuette makes the public distinctly uneasy, all its ideas about sculpture, about cold lifeless whiteness . . . are demolished . . . this statuette is the only truly modern attempt I know in sculpture.”²

Indeed, conventional female subjects for sculpture included ancient goddesses, allegorical figures, or heroines from literature. Degas took an artistic risk in modeling — and clothing — a wax figure of a contemporary girl, in training for a profession with a dubious reputation in his time. Like performance and sports today, a dance career offered a slim chance at stardom and escape from poverty, but it also brought temptations and risks. Most dancers made very little money and often looked elsewhere for support. An occasional ominous presence in Degas’s ballet pictures is the



Fig. 10
Edgar Degas, *The Curtain*,
c. 1880, pastel over charcoal
and monotype on laid paper
mounted on board, National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul
Mellon

Fig. 11
Edgar Degas, executed in col-
laboration with Vicomte Lepic,
*The Ballet Master (Le maître
de ballet)*, c. 1874, monotype
heightened and corrected with
white chalk or wash. National
Gallery of Art, Washington,
Rosenwald Collection



black-clad gentleman, gazing from a theater box or side wing or standing backstage (figs. 2, 10). Such figures were wealthy ballet subscribers who were granted access to behind-the-scenes spaces at the opera house — and hence to dancers, often becoming their “protectors,” a subject of salacious gossip.

The experimentation Degas brought to the creation of *Little Dancer*, combining materials in inventive ways, is typical of his approach to making art regardless of medium. Dance also provided the subject for *The Ballet Master*, his first monotype (fig. 11), a kind of print for which he manipulated ink on a blank copper plate with brush, fingers, or cloth. Sending it through a press with a sheet of paper produced a single, lush impression, and sometimes a second fainter one. *The Ballet Master* is co-signed by his friend Vicomte Ludovic-Napoléon Lepic, an innovative



Fig. 12
Edgar Degas, *Ballet Scene*,
c. 1907, pastel on greenish
transparent tracing paper.
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Chester Dale
Collection

printmaker who introduced him to the challenging technique. Printed in black ink and enhanced with white chalk or wash, the figures emerge eerily from the inky darkness. In other monotypes Degas added pastel to the printed image (fig. 10), conferring glowing color on performers and stage sets under theatrical lighting.

All but one of the works in this exhibition date from within ten years of *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. The latest, a grand pastel of 1907 with jarring, brilliant colors (fig. 12), may be one of his last images of a world that had inspired the artist, now aging and nearly blind, for more than four decades. The subject was dance, but more than that, the theme was movement: certain poses evoke the small sculptures of dancers Degas had modeled throughout his career. While those sculptures may have helped him to work out poses in his two-dimensional works, many of them also reflect his obsessive effort to grasp a particular movement by modeling it again and again. By observing, exploring, and portraying ballet Degas strove endlessly, in every medium, to claim the ancient artistic theme of the human body in motion as a subject that belonged equally to his own time.

When Degas died in 1917, more than one hundred sculptures (many of them broken), made of wax, clay, and a few in plaster, were found in his studio. Seventy-four of these sculptures from Degas's lifetime were cast posthumously in bronze, mostly in the 1920s. In 1956 and 1958 Paul Mellon acquired all seventy original sculptures that survived the casting process. Beginning in 1985, he gave fifty-two, including *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, to the National Gallery of Art. Additional Degas dancers in wax, plaster, and bronze, along with examples of his sculptures of horses, bathers, and a schoolgirl, can be seen in the ground floor Sculpture Galleries in the West Building (G3-4). Details on the history and technique of the sculpture can be found in *Edgar Degas Sculpture* (National Gallery of Art, 2010) by Suzanne Glover Lindsay, Daphne S. Barbour, and Shelley G. Sturman.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is presented in conjunction with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts' world premiere musical *Little Dancer* (October 25 – November 30, 2014), inspired by Degas's original wax statuette in the collection of the National Gallery of Art.

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Brochure written by Alison Luchs, curator of early European sculpture, with Margaret Doyle, department of exhibition programs, and produced by the publishing office, National Gallery of Art.

Hours: Monday – Saturday, 10:00 am – 5:00 pm; Sunday, 11:00 am – 6:00 pm

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Programs

National Gallery of Art

www.nga.gov/littledancer

National Gallery Orchestra
Philippe Entremont, guest conductor
Michel Lethiec, clarinetist
Saint-Saëns Clarinet Concerto and other music by French composers
Sunday, October 12, 6:30 pm
National Gallery of Art, West Building, West Garden Court

Inside Look:

Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

Daphne Barbour, senior conservator, department of object conservation;
Alison Luchs, curator of early European sculpture; and Shelley Sturman, senior conservator and head, department of object conservation
Sunday, November 23, 2:00 pm
National Gallery of Art, West Building, Lecture Hall

Kennedy Center

www.kennedy-center.org/littledancer

Degas & His Dancers

Kimberly A. Jones, associate curator of French paintings, National Gallery of Art
Saturday, November 8, noon
Kennedy Center Grand Foyer

The Most Famous Obscure Dancer in the World: Marie van Goethem

Richard Kendall, art historian, and Jill De Vonyar, dance historian
Saturday, November 15, noon
Kennedy Center Grand Foyer

The Life of a 19th Century Dancer:

Paris Opera Ballet & Les Petits Rats
Alexandra Tomalonis, dance historian
Saturday, November 22, noon
Kennedy Center Grand Foyer

Cover

Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878 – 1881, pigmented beeswax, clay, metal armature, rope, paintbrushes, human hair, silk and linen ribbon, cotton and silk tutu, linen slippers, on wooden base. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon