DEGAS'S SCULPTURE
A REPLY TO "ARABESQUES IN BRONZE"
By JOHN REWALD

Mr. Gardner's article on Degas's sculpture, "Arabesques in Bronze," in the January, 1946, issue of the Metropolitan Museum Bulletin raises several interesting and controversial questions. Mr. Gardner contends that modeling became the painter's "principal amusement as the years closed about him." Had he studied the present writer's catalogue of Degas's work in sculpture more carefully, he might have seen that Degas worked in clay or wax throughout the years, from as early as 1865 (he was then thirty-one), and that at least after 1880, according to the testimony of Paul Durand-Ruel, he devoted nearly as much time to modeling as to painting. Does it not seem rather peremptory to assert that a man as intensely conscious of his work as Degas should have spent so much time and effort on a mere "pleasant pastime?" The fact that increasing eye trouble caused Degas to concentrate exclusively on sculpture during his later years by no means justifies the conclusion quoted by Mr. Gardner, according to which the artist, had he not been handicapped by semi-blindness, "would have recorded his ideas in his proper medium—in chalk or pencil." Quite to the contrary, when he could no longer see, Degas knew he would also have to give up modeling; for work that was but approximately right see never have been a consolation—even less an amusement—for one who rarely found satisfaction in perfection itself.

The extremely ingenious display of photographs on pages 132-133 of the January Bulletin shows precisely with what care and logic Degas studied the various phases of an arabesque in order to exploit all the possibilities he was aware of in his medium. It seems hardly warranted, therefore, to claim, as Mr. Gardner does, that Degas's statuette "cannot be considered as serious works in sculpture." In my opinion there can be no doubt that Degas was never anything but serious when his art was concerned.

Referring to an opinion which I had expressed in my catalogue and which he calls "романтич," Mr. Gardner sees in Degas's disregard for properly designed armatures a further proof that the artist "regarded these little experiments in clay as sketches, not as finished works of art, and that he did not care to have the serious craftsman's regard for technique interfere with a mere pleasant pastime." This view conflicts singularly with the fact, reported by witnesses, that Degas was subject to fits of rage whenever a statuette collapsed. If Degas chose nevertheless not to heed Bartholomé's technical advice and preferred his own empirical methods, it was doubtless because the difficulties with which he struggled belonged, in the words of Paul Valéry, to the order of difficulties, "incomprehensible to most people (and even to some of the trade), which the true artist invents and imposes upon himself." According to Denis Rouart, son and grandson of intimate friends of Degas, the artist "was not discouraged by difficulties and problems which he encountered. To the contrary, he liked to face them and might even have created them if they had not existed."

Unwilling to approach Degas's statuettes as sculptures, Mr. Gardner proposes that we consider them as "drawings in clay," pointing out that some persons who have written about them have mentioned the word draftsman. This suggests a fallacious conclusion. It might oblige Mr. Gardner to classify as relief every painting in connection with which there has ever been mention of modeling. (It would lead too far to point out here that those who make what Mr. Gardner calls "sculpture in the academic sense of that word" proceed frequently from line instead of from volume and that Degas's statuettes are not the expression of a
painter or draftsman but are conceived by a true sculptor who seeks nothing but form.)

Mr. Gardner insists on the fact that Degas only once, in 1881, exhibited a piece of sculpture, but this does not authorize him to conclude that the artist himself attached little importance to his statuettes. After 1886 Degas never exhibited any paintings either. Nobody, probably, would find in this circumstance an argument to deny the mature qualities of the work done by Degas during his last thirty years. The same evidently applies to his statuettes. The artist’s reluctance to communicate with the public certainly does not furnish us with any evidence as to his own opinion of his works, either painted or modeled, nor does it permit us to consider these works as unfinished.

Unquestionably, Degas considered some of his paintings, pastels, drawings, and statuettes unfinished, but we shall never know which ones; nor shall we know to what extent he intended to complete them. After his death, only one course could be taken and that was to preserve whatever Degas had left. Thus the casting in bronze of those statuettes that could be retrieved imposed itself, since this was the only way to save them.

It is true that Degas himself never had any of his statuettes cast in bronze. This does not prove, however, that the artist considered them products of his “lighter moments.” A point passed over by Mr. Gardner but noted in my catalogue is that Degas had several of his modeling cast in plaster and that he kept others carefully preserved under glass in his apartment. Moreover, Degas did dream of having some cast in bronze, as he once confessed to Maillol, but he was apparently reluctant because bronze cannot be retouched. We must not forget that Degas was continually haunted by the curse of perfectionism. In 1874, for instance, he made a curious deal with the collector Faure, who bought back from Durand-Ruel six canvases which Degas regretted having sold. Faure turned them over to the painter so that he might rework them; in exchange Degas promised to do for him four large compositions, two of which were delivered in 1876. After waiting eleven years more for the remaining two, Faure finally hailed Degas into court in order to obtain satisfaction. Does it seem surprising, under these circumstances, that Degas preferred to keep his statuettes as they were or to cast them merely in plaster, instead of entrusting them to the finite forms of metal?

Mr. Gardner raises the question whether Degas would have wanted his statuettes cast in bronze after his death. In general, it is safe to assume, we ought to judge the quality of an artist’s achievement rather than his intentions. Moreover, if we extended Mr. Gardner’s scruples to the whole of Degas’s work, we should find ourselves confronted with the problem of whether the artist would have consented to having the contents of his drawers and portfolios dispersed at auction, his sketches framed and exhibited. The case is even further complicated if we consider works such as the famous Dancers Practicing at the Bar, a painting now owned by the Metropolitan Museum but for many years in the collection of Degas’s friend Rouart. It is known that the artist always wanted to retouch it and to eliminate the green watering can. Anecdotes have it that Rouart, made wise by Faure’s experience, had the picture chained to the wall so as to prevent Degas’s removing it. We thus have here a work of which we know Degas did not approve in its present state. If we follow Mr. Gardner in his respect for the artist’s intentions, the painting would have to be removed from display or retouched by a restorer in accordance with Degas’s expressed wish.

Careful not to take a position himself, Mr. Gardner merely quotes the pros and cons raised by the casting in bronze of Degas’s statuettes. But those who have not grasped the impact of these works receive the weight of the last paragraph of his article. At the point where authors usually draw up their conclusions, Mr. Gardner writes: “It has been remarked by certain critics that the reduplicate preservation of these unfinished sketches in twenty sets of bronzes—when the artist so obviously considered them too ephemeral to be worthy of a brazen bid for eternity—is rather too plainly a franc-stretching gesture on the part of the heirs.” It is embarrassing to see such a petty argument displayed in a
Does the attitude of the heirs have anything to do with the quality of Degas's works? Besides, as far as I have been able to find out from Mr. Gaston Musson, one of the Degas heirs in New Orleans, and from Mr. André Lafargue, his lawyer, the proposal to cast the statuettes came from Hébrard, the founder, who merely requested an authorization from the heirs. He did the casting at his own expense, reserving for the heirs of the artist a share in the proceeds.

Instead of quoting prominently the views of "certain critics," it would have been more profitable if Mr. Gardner had told us who pronounced against Degas's statuettes. The list of those who admired Degas's works in sculpture carries considerable weight. Among them are several who did not consider Degas, as Mr. Gardner asserts, "a great sculptor simply because these drawings in clay have been preserved in bronze." They admired the statuettes even before they were cast. One of these was Renoir, himself one of the foremost sculptors of his time, who called Degas the greatest living sculptor; others were Walter Sickert, Aristide Maillol, and, last but not least, Mary Cassatt. There probably has never been a greater admirer of the painter Degas than his friend and "pupil" Mary Cassatt. Yet it was she who wrote to Mrs. Havemeyer: "I have studied Degas's sculptures for months. I believe he will live to be greater as a sculptor than as a painter."

It was doubtless on the strength of this conviction, expressed by her adviser over many years (an adviser to whom the Metropolitan Museum owes so much), that Mrs. Havemeyer bought a complete set of Degas's bronzes and bequeathed it to the Museum. The public would certainly welcome this set if it were put on display.

The statuette illustrated below is one of a small group which Degas asked the founder Hébrard to cast in plaster. Mr. Rewald comments on this subject in his catalogue (Degas: Works in Sculpture, published in 1944 by Pantheon Books): "It is evident that the artist chose for casting those of his works which he considered finished and also worth while to be preserved."—Editor