ARABESQUES IN BRONZE

By ALBERT TEN EYCK GARDNER

Research Fellow

From about 1886 until the time of his death in 1917 the painter Degas cut himself off from the world and lived as a hermit in his Paris studio. He received only a few intimate friends, and as these men of his own generation passed away he sank deeper and deeper into an embittered solitude. He repulsed the advances of those who sought him out to admire him and to honor him as a great artist, and with his antisocial eccentricities, his famous sarcasms (he had frightened even the glib Jimmy Whistler to silence), and his sudden rages, he built up and jealously guarded a wall of privacy.

Degas devoted his time almost ceaselessly to work, drawing and painting, but as his eyesight failed with advancing age he consoled himself more and more with modeling little statuettes of ballet dancers and horses. In fact, these small clay studies became his principal amusement as the years closed about him. They were a constant source of pleasure to him, although he worked on them with painful slowness, building up figures and tearing them down or allowing them to fall to pieces as his interest lagged or shifted. Sometimes the clay or wax proved difficult to manage, and his models fell to pieces of their own weight. Degas spoke of sculpture as a “blind man’s trade,” deriding the very art which was his principal solace in affliction and loneliness. With an obtuse pride, he ignored all but the most rudimentary principles of the sculptor’s craft and even the mechanics that would have made his work easier. He believed that “on the whole one amuses himself only with what he doesn’t know” and worked with whatever materials came to hand. Speaking of his sculpture in a letter to a friend, Degas exclaims, “Heavens! how I floundered at first; and how little we know what we are about when we do not trust to expert knowledge. It is useless to say we can do anything with naïveté; we may perhaps get there, but so sloppily!”

It has been romantically supposed by some that Degas’s rejection of “the tricks of the trade” of sculpture was caused by his feeling that properly designed armatures to support his figurines would interfere with his freedom of expression. But it is more likely, when one considers the remark quoted above, that he 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. He was too much of a craftsman in drawing not to know the inescapable importance of expert knowledge to prevent floundering and sloppiness.

These little dancers, of which he made so many studies, were the companions of his old age. The strange arabesques prescribed by the formal ballet, with their curious and arbitrary motion, appealed to his taste for "difficult" poses. He seems to have found in the postures of the ballet a paradoxical beauty-in-ugliness that is greatly at odds with the prettiness so fashionable with ordinary painters and sculptors of the time. While the dancers of Carpeaux, for instance, seem to sum up in their imitation vivacity all that is vacuous and vulgar, those of Degas have, in spite of everything, an air of vitality not to be captured by facile modeling.

Their movement and gestures show in a truly remarkable way Degas's tremendous powers as a draftsman. They restate, as it were, in an unfamiliar language, the keenly dissected truths that make his drawings and paintings such masterly vivisections. These are sketches, or studies, or experiments, but they cannot be considered as serious works in sculpture in the academic sense of that word. The artist himself refused to have any of them cast in bronze during his lifetime, saying that "bronze was for eternity." Perhaps these works should be considered as drawings in clay—the only medium suitable to the hand of a painter with failing eyesight.

If one asks any proof that Degas was a painter and draftsman rather than a sculptor, or that his imagination was essentially pictorial rather than sculptural, one need only examine his most important finished work in wax (the only one exhibited during his lifetime)—La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans, made about 1880—quite some time before approaching blindness confined him to working in clay. In this remarkable figure Degas's conception of sculpture as realistic illustration is carried to the point of deck ing out a wax image in a skirt of real tulle and tying the hair with a real silk ribbon. When the figure was shown in Paris it wore a real cloth bodice and real dancing slippers. Although these
innovations were considered by some a sign of radical modernity, an important advance in the art of sculpture, others thought them in shocking bad taste. Today we see them as little more than a slight modification of the well-known Victorian obsession with accessories that cropped up so relentlessly in parlor statuary and in religious images covered by pious hands with votive vestments and gauds, or even of that more gruesome popular diversion, the waxworks.

Since these bronzes were cast, two estimates of their significance have crystallized—two opinions, which are, to put it mildly, rather widely at variance. First, and perhaps most numerous, there are those critics who accept every work of the artist, in no matter what medium, as the expression of profound genius—the Master is allowed no lighter moments. They class him as a great sculptor simply because these drawings in clay have been preserved in bronze—the conventional plastic medium of the time. Others feel that the statuettes are to be considered as Degas seemed to consider them—as experimental notes; they feel that had the artist not been handicapped by semi-blindness he would have recorded his ideas in his proper medium—in chalk or pencil.

It is interesting to note that when even the most favorably disposed critics speak of Degas as a sculptor, they end their praises of his work in clay, perhaps unconsciously, by mentioning draftsmanship, a quality essential in painting but of secondary importance in the art of true sculpture. For example, Renoir writes, “Who said anything about Rodin? Why, Degas is the greatest living sculptor! You should have seen that bas-relief of his . . . he just let it crumble to pieces. . . . It was as beautiful as an antique. And that ballet dancer in wax! . . . the mouth . . . was just a suggestion, but what drawing!” R. R. Tatlock, reviewing an exhibition of the Degas bronzes for The Burlington Magazine, says, “Before spending a little time among these exquisite figures of agile women and fleet horses, each a complex design of flashing limb and quivering muscle, few of us can have realized how tremendous Degas was as a sculptor—and as a draftsman.”
The statuette illustrated above and those on pages 131, 132-133, and 135 are from a set of Degas bronzes, complete but for the absence of numbers 19 and 41, which was bequeathed to the Museum by Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer in 1929.
Long before his death Degas had become a legend, and curiosity about him and the mysterious contents of his studio ran riot. When he died in 1917 his heirs had an inventory made of the contents of his rooms in preparation for an auction, and among the extraordinary treasure of paintings and drawings were found over a hundred statuettes in wax and clay. Many of them were broken and bent beyond repair; some had crumbled away to nothing. About seventy-three of them, however, were salvaged, and at the order of Degas’s heirs they were repaired by the sculptor Bartholomé and cast in bronze. Twenty-two copies of each figurine were made: One set was reserved for the heirs, one for the caster, A. A. Hebrard, the remaining twenty sets were marked for sale.

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. However that may be, it is by this parsimony, more than any other factor, that we are allowed, as it were, to observe the master draftsman at play.

LA DANSE

Il semble qu’autrefois la Nature indolente,
Sure de la beauté de son corps, s’endormait
Trop lourde, si toujours la Danse ne venait
L’éveiller de sa voix heureuse et haletante,
Et puis, en lui battant la mesure engageante,
Avec le mouvement de ses mains qui parlaient,
Et l’entrecroisement de ses pieds qui brulaient,
La forcer à sauter, devant elle, contente.
Partez, sans le secours inutile du beau,
Mignonnes, avec ce populacier museau,
Sautez effrontément, prêtresses de la grâce.
En vous la Danse a mis quelque chose d’à part,
Héroïque et lointain. On sait, de votre place,
Que les reines se font de distance et de fard.

Edgar Degas