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Almost a century after their creation, Degas' figures still amaze and delight.

By Barbara E. Cohen

There are several reasons to view the new exhibition, “Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures,” at Grand Rapids’ Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, which runs from May 30 to August 31.

Perhaps the most important reason to visit is that it’s a small miracle the bronzes exist at all.

REPUTATION

The exhibition makes clear why Edgar Degas is universally acknowledged as one of the masters of the Impressionist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What is not so clear is why this collection in particular causes such a stir,

The exhibition—curated by art historian Joseph S. Czestochowski, former director of International Arts in Memphis, Tenn., and on loan from the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Assis Chateaubriand in Brazil—offers a rare opportunity to view one of only four complete sets of Degas’ bronze figures, which depict dancers, bathers and horses, and sheds light on the artist’s innovative techniques and idiosyncratic modes of expression.

“This is an extraordinary opportunity to see the quality of the objects,” says Joseph Becherer, director and curator of the sculpture program at the park. “The exhibition offers a chance to enjoy the works collectively and to see the recurring themes in Degas’ work.”

PRESERVATION



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The 73 works were cast from a collection of about 150 wax and plasticine figurines found in Degas' Paris studio after his death on Sept. 27, 1917.

The value of the sculptures has been disputed because only one of them was exhibited publicly while Degas was alive. Most were works-in-progress that the artist had just created or reworked, maybe never intending to cast them.

"Would Degas be pleased with all this? I have my doubts. But," said Paul Paulin writing to Paul Lafond in May 1918, "he should have made a timely will."

In the midst of the controversy, 22 numbered sets were commissioned, but only four were ever made. Those four sets found their way into museums in Paris; New York; Copenhagen, Denmark; and São Paulo, where they are rarely exhibited in their entirety, in spite of their popularity among art lovers.

IF YOU GO



Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich., opened to the public in April 1995. It's the most popular tourist destination in West Michigan and just a 10-minute drive from downtown Grand Rapids.

The gardens include Michigan's largest tropical conservatory, three indoor theme gardens, outdoor gardens, nature trails, a boardwalk, sculpture galleries, a permanent sculpture collection, library, audiovisual theater, café, gift shop, classrooms, and meeting rooms. The venue's 132 acres are barrier-free and handicapped-accessible, both inside and outdoors.

Regular hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$12 for adults; \$9 for seniors and students; \$6 for children ages 5 to 13; \$4 for children ages 3 and 4; and free for children 2 and younger.

Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

1000 East Beltline Ave. NE

616-957-1580

<http://www.meijergardens.org/>

OBSERVATION

A few of the pieces in this exhibition reveal Degas' relationship with his contemporaries in the Impressionist movement.

"They're a study in surfaces, textures and his interest in movement," Becherer says. "The figurines allow us to jump into the scenes that are familiar in his other works."

Perhaps best-known is *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*. More than a century after its first public show (at the sixth of seven so-called Impressionist Exhibitions in 1881, given by Degas and his contemporaries in Paris), it remains one of the most recognizable Impressionist sculptures. How is it, then, that the artist exhibited the wax original just once?

Public criticism of the work—which was called vulgar, repugnant and frightful—apparently fouled Degas' interest in public exhibition of his other figurines. He continued to create them privately, however, while showing his drawing and painting publicly.

Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen wasn't universally criticized, but most people were taken aback by the realism of the original piece, which was dressed in a wig made of real hair, which was pulled back in a ribbon. The figure was also wearing a tutu made of real fabric. Like its wax original, the bronze ballerina is dressed in the tutu and ribbon, and even with the hair now cast in bronze, we can gather something of the work's initial impact.

"In particular, people were offended by the seemingly unfinished surface texture of the works, which were not highly polished like that of his contemporaries," Becherer says. "We see the impression of Degas' fingers and his tool marks."

Horse with Jockey and *Horse Galloping on Right Foot, the Back Left Only Touching the Ground* reveal Degas' interest in capturing movement, influenced by the innovative stop-action photography of contemporaries like Eadweard Muybridge, as well as that of Degas himself.

"He succeeds in perfectly capturing the sinewy, taut pose of the rider whose energy seems to flow," says Ann Pingeot in the *catalogue raisonné* that accompanies the exhibition. "Degas seized the fluid action of the horse and rider by teasing, pinching, pulling and squeezing the malleable wax freely between his fingers and thumbs. This is evident on the horse's neck, where Degas has folded the wax over itself, leaving a clear imprint of his thumb."

Dancer Looking at the Sole of Her Right Foot shows Degas working out forms in space. Spatial relationships interested him more than light did, although light is usually considered the hallmark of Impressionism.

Finally, in *The Tub*, Degas breaks entirely with conventional subject matter and materials of the day. X-rays of the original wax model reveal it was embedded with bits of fabric and cork, with a layer of thin plaster simulating the water.

While most celebrated for his pastel colors and paintings, "Degas in Bronze: The Complete Sculptures" is a look into the artist's more personal projects. Who would pass up the opportunity to look inside the heart of one of the Impressionist movement's most acclaimed talents?

SCULPTURES TO SEE

After viewing the Degas exhibition, why not sample the permanent sculpture collection? Joseph Becherer, director and curator of the sculpture program at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, recommends focusing on some of the museum's most significant works.



Artist: Mark di Suvero

Nationality: American, born 1933

Title: *Scarlattii*

Medium: Weathering COR-TEN, stainless steel

Height: 25 feet, four inches

Compared to his usual installations in urban environments, Mark di Suvero's *Scarlattii* is nonrepresentational, set in an Oz-like wildflower meadow.



Artist: Jonathan Borofsky

Nationality: American, born 1942

Title: *Male/Female*

Medium: Aluminum

Height: 23 feet

Jonathan Borofsky's *Male/Female* is a redefinition of classic male and female roles, highlighting the dichotomy between culture (male) and nature (female).



Artist: Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen

Nationality: American, born Sweden 1929; Dutch, born 1942

Title: *Plantoir*

Medium: Stainless steel, aluminum, fiberglass

Height: 23 feet, 11 inches

Plantoir is one of the most important pieces in the park. It was the first large-scale work, and highlights the groundbreaking nature of the garden.

PHOTOS BY WILLIAM J. HEBERT (COURTESY FMG).



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