



# Little dancer aged fourteen

Edgar Degas

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Little dancer aged fourteen

**Artist/Maker:** Edgar Degas

**Born:** 1880 - 1881

**Object Type:** Sculpture

**Materials:** Bronze, Fibre

**Measurements:** h. 980 x w. 510 x d. 510 mm

**Inscription:** Degas

**Accession Number:** 2

**Historic Period:** 19th century

**Production Place:** Europe, France

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Edgar Degas (1834–1917) is considered as one of the greatest sculptors of the 19th century but remarkably, the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* is the only sculpture he exhibited in his lifetime. It is now one of the most famous sculptures and delights spectators with its sensitive portrayal of a young ballerina. The sculpture has a complex history and multi-layered meaning. When first exhibited it was controversial for reasons that we now find surprising. Yet it also has a darker side that reveals much about the chauvinistic world of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. A comprehensive interpretation is required for one of the most important works of art and perhaps, the first modern sculpture. [1]

The model for the Little Dancer was a young student of the Paris Opéra Ballet dance school, a Belgian named Marie van Goethem.[2] Her identity was established through a series of drawings that Degas completed as studies for the sculpture. Marie was fourteen on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1878 and Degas made drawings of her both nude as well as dressed. He also modelled a nude study of her. [3] Marie was the daughter of Belgian parents, a laundress and tailor. She had two sisters who were also ballet students and all seem to have modelled for Degas. [4]

The Little Dancer is posed in what is known in ballet as the fourth position, her arms behind her back and hands clasped. Her right leg is extended forward and her foot is twisted at an angle. This implies movement whilst simultaneously reflecting physical strength, but also vulnerability. Her posture pushes her body upwards, rendering a pose of control, great dignity and serenity. The format Degas chose for the figure was three-quarters life-size.

Degas is chiefly associated with the female figure, more often represented bathing or similar ablutions as well as the ballet. These subjects he addressed with a remarkable sense of realism for which Degas' work is rightly renowned. But it was also his pursuit of realism that so offended 'polite society' and it was often rather too shocking for his contemporary audience. Degas was fascinated by the everyday unobserved movements of his subject. The ability to capture the event offers a deeper intimacy with the subject. The ballerina presented Degas with complexity in composition. The unconventional pose afforded the opportunity to heighten the sense of a female figure in motion. Degas was as obsessed with capturing the body in motion as he was by the art of classical ballet. Through ballet Degas was able to explore broader themes about the human condition and the harsh realities of modern life. Although he exhibited with the Impressionists, Degas preferred to be called a realist. [5] The title of the work was given by Degas and is quite typical in the way he applied quite precise everyday descriptive titles.

The original version of *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* exhibited by Degas was made in wax and clay, whereas this example is cast in bronze. After Degas' death, his heirs (his brother and sister's children) made the decision to have the wax sculpture cast in bronze. [6] Degas' sculptures have survived in three forms: wax originals, which were repaired shortly after his death in 1917 (now mostly in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC); a master (modèle) set of bronzes made in 1919 from modified waxes by the Hébrard Foundry (now in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena); and a series of 'Hébrard' bronze casts made from the master bronzes from 1919 to 1936 and again from 1955 to 1964 (dispersed among museums and private collections). This example in the Sainsbury Centre Collection is from the 1919-36 set of 'Hébrard' bronzes of which there are thought to be at least 29 and thought to have been made in c1922.[7] These early casts were dressed in tutus and hair ribbons by Degas' niece, Jeanne Fevre. [8]

It is likely Degas started work on drawings and the nude version of the Little Dancer at some point after February 1878, when Maria was fourteen. This continued during 1879 and up until the spring of 1880 when it had been his intention to show it at the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition of 1880 in Paris. Whether this was a nude version or clothed is not entirely clear. Either it was not ready or least Degas was uncertain about it as in fact it never appeared. Only the glass case that Degas had built for it was displayed, enigmatically left empty throughout the exhibition. [9]

The Little Dancer was actually shown at the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition of 1881. The now dressed figure was received with astonishment because of its unusual character. This was further exacerbated as the sculpture arrived several days late. The critic and author Joris-Karl Huysmans thought he had seen the first truly modern attempt at sculpture:

*'The chief attraction of his exhibition is not , this year, to be found among his drawings or paintings.....it is one single wax figure....from which the public, quite bewildered and embarrassed, run away. The frightful realism of this statuette evidently makes people uncomfortable; all its ideas on sculpture, on those cold, inanimate white objects, on those memorable imitations copied over and over since centuries, are upset. The fact is that, at one blow, Mr. Degas has overthrown the*

*traditions of sculpture as he long ago weakened the conventions of painting.'* [10]

This level of realism was considered shocking and polarised its original audience, who were accustomed to more idealised representations of the human body. Some critics and many general observers were deeply shocked by the sculpture. This was not an idealised form of classical sculpture that spectators were accustomed to. Many felt that it all too real and animalistic in its rawness. This feeling was perhaps heightened by Degas's decision to display the sculpture in a glass case, which to his audience would have felt more appropriate for scientific specimens or a cabinet of curiosities. He also dressed the sculpture in real clothes. The version of the Little Dancer that Degas exhibited in 1881 was made of pigmented beeswax and clay over a metal armature. Startling of all, it had real human hair and was dressed in a cotton faille bodice, cotton and silk tutu, silk and linen ribbon, linen slippers. This was all coated in a thin layer of wax that Degas tinted to enhance the illusion of life. Realistic wax effigies or figures appeared in the middle ages as funerary practice. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century a popular form of waxworks or wax museums appeared in Europe. It was perhaps this element, an affront to art and good taste that made Degas' sculpture so controversial. Some critics compared it disparagingly to Madame Tussaud's waxworks. "Can art descend lower?" one anonymous writer asked. [11] The art critic Paul Mantz described the dancer as a "flower of precocious depravity," with a "face marked by the hateful promise of every vice." Mantz further exposed the prejudice against ballet dancers in general: "With bestial effrontery," he wrote, "she moves her face forward, or rather her little muzzle -- and this word is completely correct because the little girl is the beginning of a rat." [12]

The subject matter is challenging today not because of its perceived reality, instead because of the sexual exploration that was endemic in the ballet which in Paris of the time was almost entirely predicated on a lecherous misogynist world. The spectator today is faced with a dilemma of applying standards of our own time to the realities of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, sex work was a part of a ballerina's reality, and the city's opera house, the Palais Garnier, was designed with this in mind. A luxuriously appointed room located behind the stage, called the foyer de la danse, was a place where the dancers would warm up before performances. But it also served wealthy male subscribers to the opera, who could conduct business, socialize and proposition the ballerinas.[13] The unbalanced power dynamic was a reality of life for the young ballerinas. They entered the academy as children, derisively called petits rats, came from working-class or impoverished backgrounds. They often joined the ballet to support their families, working gruelling, six-day weeks. Their earnings and careers were beholden to the men prowling backstage. They were expected to submit to the affections of these subscribers, and could be coerced into such relationships with the prospect of financial reward. Although Degas was not directly associated with the sexual exploitation, the foyer de la danse was of great interest to him and he depicted it often. He also demanded his models pose for hours at a time, enduring excruciating discomfort as they held their contorted positions. He wanted to capture his "little monkey girls," as he called them, "cracking their joints" at the barre. "I have perhaps too often considered woman as an animal," he once told the painter Pierre Georges Jeannot in a moment of revealing honesty. [15]

In 1903, the collector Louisine Havemeyer visited Degas with the artist Mary Cassatt and asked to purchase the wax version of the Little dancer. Degas considered the idea of making a cleaner wax copy or casting it in bronze, but Havemeyer wished only to obtain the original, with which the artist was unwilling to part.[16] After his death in 1917, many of the sculptures including the Little Dancer, were damaged or in a fragmentary condition in his studio. A friend of Degas, the sculptor Paul-Albert Bartholomé, helped select and repair seventy-two of these for a limited-edition series of bronzes. The Paris foundry A. A. Hébrard, which specialized in lost-wax casting, was instructed to

avoid cleaning up the sculptures before taking the moulds. [16] This work was underway by 1919 although the first bronze cast of this work was not made until late 1922. [17] The quality of the Hébrard bronzes is celebrated and the master founder, Albino Palazzolo was awarded the Legion of Honor in recognition of the skill. With Cassatt's help, Havemeyer secured the first cast of the bronzes and gave sixty-nine of them to The Metropolitan Museum in New York. Since the gelatin moulds were damaged in the process, these first bronzes retain details lost in subsequent casts. Details such as the texture of the wax-covered hair and bodice to flaws like the crack in the dancer's left arm. [18]

The Sainsbury Centre 1922 Hébrard cast was purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Wildenstein & Co. London in 1938. It was donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift. There is a bronze foundry plaque on the right rear of the base and a cast of Degas signature. The foundry stamp also appears on the figure's upper left thigh. *Cire Perdu A.A. Herard*

Calvin Winner, February 2022

## References

[1] J. Rewald, Degas, Works in Sculpture: A complete Catalogue, Pantheon books 1944, p.7-8

[2] <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/degas-little-dancer-aged-fourteen-n06076> Accessed 11/02/2022

[3] Ronald Alley, Catalogue of the Tate Gallery Modern Collection, 1981, p.149

[4] Alley, p.149

[5] the critic Jules Claretie in 1881 coined the phrase impressionist sculptors (sculpteurs impressionnistes)) Chris Stephens, Holbourne Museum correspondence May 2021, Sainsbury centre archives

[6] <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110310.html> Accessed 11/02/2022

[7] Recorded in Sainsbury Centre archives as c1922

[8] Steven Hooper (Ed), Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Yale University press, 1997, p.186

[9] Theodore Reff, Degas the artist's mind, Thames and Hudson 1976, p.242

[10] J. Rewald, p.7-8]

[11] <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/edgar-degas-ballet-dancers-artsy/index.html> Accessed 11/02/2022

[12] J. Rewald, p.7

[13] <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/edgar-degas-ballet-dancers-artsy/index.html> Accessed 11/02/2022

[14] <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110292.html> Accessed 11/02/2022

[15] <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/edgar-degas-ballet-dancers-artsy/index.html> Accessed 11/02/2022

[16] <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/conservation-and-scientific-research/conservation-stories/2020/degas-dancer> Accessed 11/02/2022

[17] Alley p.150

[18] <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/conservation-and-scientific-research/conservation-stories/2020/degas-dancer> Accessed 11/02/2022

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## Exhibitions

'Sense and Sensuality', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 2/2014 - 12/2014

'Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things', The Hepworth Wakefield, 2/2019 - 6/2019

'Pablo Picasso: The Legacy of Youth', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/3/2022 - 17/7/2022

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## Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Messrs. Wildenstein & Co. London in 1938.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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