

Edgar Degas



Edgar Degas, *Portrait of the artist*, 1855, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 32 x 25 3/8 in., Musée d'Orsay, © The Art Archive/Musée d'Orsay, Paris/Gianni Dagli Ort

Edgar Degas, born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar de Gas in Paris on July 19, 1834, developed an interest in painting quite early in life, but his father encouraged him to attend law school. After a brief legal education, Degas entered the renowned art academy, the École des Beaux-Arts in 1855. There he learned techniques by copying classical paintings and sculptures from the Old Masters of the Renaissance. He trained to be a history painter through his portrayal of grand scenes from the classical and Biblical past. Then after three years studying in Italy, Degas returned to Paris where he exhibited his work at the Paris Salon, an enormous annual exhibition bringing together the most popular artists in France. Considered one of the founders of Impressionism, Degas helped organize the movement's initial exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s. He ceased painting history and was one of the first artists to incorporate scenes of modern French urban life. Such radical and unconventional subjects as ballet dancers, horse races, and opera houses characteristic of modern and industrial Paris, found their way into his artworks. Such striking scenes of modernity were shocking

to viewers, since previously the great subjects in art were taken from history, literature, or religion. The most successful painters of the Academy, and who were featured in the Salon, typically portrayed idealized images of heroic morals and elegant beauty. Degas' dancers and singers came from morally suspect backgrounds, and were often depicted in awkward or fleeting poses. These pastel drawings of dancers quickly propelled him to fame. Degas experimented with a broad variety of artistic mediums throughout his career, teaching himself photography, printmaking, and sculpture. While many found his images of the urban city shocking due to their radical technique and questionable depictions of immoral behavior, he achieved substantial fame and renown during his lifetime. Degas died in Paris on September 27, 1917.



Edgar Degas, *Dancer with a Bouquet*, ca. 1877-1880, pastel & gouache over monotype laid paper, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8 in., Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Gift of Murray S. Danforth, 42.213



Edgar Degas
French, 1834-1917
Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old
(*La petite Danseuse de quatorze ans*)
1881
cast ca. 1920-21, plaster, 39 x 19 1/2 x 20 in.
Gift of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc., New York, 1971.271.a-b

Even though Edgar Degas only exhibited *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old*, once, it was a sensation surrounded by controversy. He revealed the sculpture in April of 1881 at the sixth Impressionist exhibition. Many reacted to his naturalistic portrayal of a young adolescent with horror and revulsion. One critic claimed that "[Degas] has chosen among the most odiously ugly . . . Oh certainly, at the very bottom of the barrel of the dance school, there are some poor girls who look like this young monster." Another referred to her as little better than a prostitute, calling her "the Opera rat in her modern form, learning her craft, with all her disposition and stock of bad instincts and licentious inclinations." Ballet dancers were a prominent and controversial part of French life. Dancers typically came from the working class. They made little money, and prostitution and illicit affairs with men was common. Crudely referred to as "rats," a reference to their poor background and immoral connotations, the life of a young dancer was filled with hours of grueling practices, and success was rare. France had strict rules of appropriate behavior, and the potentially immoral behavior lurking backstage was strongly criticized, despite the enormous popularity of the ballet. Before Degas, paintings and sculptures of dancers depicted only the idealized and beautiful associations of the ballet, and when actual performers were represented, they were only the most famous stars. For nearly all visitors to the sixth Impressionist exhibition, Degas' depiction of a practicing trainee instead of a graceful performer was an unexpected surprise. But while many disliked Degas' new style of sculpture, others recognized the importance of *Little Dancer*. The French novelist Joris-Karl Huysman approvingly wrote, "[Degas exhibits] a statue of wax entitled 'The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer,' before which an astonished public flies, as if embarrassed. The terrible realism of this statuette makes the public distinctly uneasy: all its ideas about sculpture, about cold, lifeless whiteness, about those memorable formulas copied again and again for centuries, are demolished. . . . This statuette is the only truly modern attempt I know in sculpture." *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, is quite different from the elegant and idealized dancers more common in art during the 19th century. Degas carefully molded every fold and wrinkle in her tights and bodice, adding to the illusionistic effect of her costume. Her right foot points outward as she interlocks her fingers behind her body. Shoulders back, she gazes upward. This pose is a variation on the "fourth position," a common practice pose for young dancers. Instead of depicting a carefully proportioned professional in the middle of a graceful arabesque, Degas depicts his model, Marie Van Goethem, as he would have seen her: a young student striving to learn through hard work and practice. Her intent expression, with her head tilted back, eyes and mouth half-closed, suggests that she is straining to meet an imagined vision of perfection and grace. *Little Dancer* captures the reality of the young dancer relentlessly practicing with the hopes of achieving future fame. With her hopeful gaze and adolescent figure, Degas' figure moves between two realms of the ballet: that of the clumsy young beginner and the poised and elegant professional.

Discussion Questions

- Why was it controversial for Edgar Degas to depict a young ballet dancer?
- Do you agree with the Degas estate's decision to posthumously cast *Little Dancer*? Why or why not?
- Which skirt, short or knee-length, do you think is more appropriate for *Little Dancer*? Why?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.



Timeline

1830

1834 Edgar Degas is born on July 19 in Paris

1840

1845 Starts preparatory studies at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand

1850

1853 Enters law school at the Sorbonne; copies paintings at Musée du Louvre

1860

1855 Studies drawing at the École des Beaux-Arts

1856 Travels to Italy to copy Old Masters

1870

1866 Starts creating portraits; stops painting historical subjects

1870 Starts to paint unconventional scenes like horse racing; serves in the military fighting in the Franco-Prussian war

1880

1872 Travels to New Orleans where his brothers are cotton merchants

1874 Participates in the first Impressionist exhibition

1881 Exhibits "The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer" at the sixth Impressionist exhibition

1890

1892 Exhibits pastel landscapes Durand-Ruel gallery

1900

1900 Participates in the Paris Centennial Exhibition

ca. 1905 Gives up drawing and painting due his failing eyesight; continues sculpting

1910

1912 Leaves Montmartre studio and completely stops working

1917 Degas dies on September 27 in Paris

Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, ca. 1873, oil on canvas, 18 3/4 x 24 1/2 in., Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., William A. Clark Collection, 26.74

Edgar Degas, *Racehorses at Longchamp*, 1871, possibly reworked in 1874, oil on canvas, 13 3/8 x 16 1/2 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, S.A. Denio Collection-Sylvanus Adams Denio Fund & General Income, 03.1034

Images (top to bottom): Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878-1881, pigmented beeswax, clay, metal armature, rope, paintbrushes, human hair, silk & linen ribbon, cotton faille bodice, cotton & silk tutu, linen slippers, on wooden base, 38 15/16 x 13 11/16 x 13 7/8 in., National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1999.80.28 Edgar Degas, *Landscape*, 1892, monotype in oil colors, heightened with pastel, 10 x 13 3/8 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mr. & Mrs. Richard J. Bernhard Gift, 1972, 1972.636

Background Images: Edgar Degas, Detail, *Dancer in Her Dressing Room (Danseuse dans sa loge)*, ca. 1879, pastel and peinture à l'essence on canvas, Cincinnati Art Museum, Bequest of Mary Hanna, 1956.114

The Tumultuous Tutu

While over a hundred years ago *Little Dancer's* seemingly ugly features and awkward pose were the topic of dispute, today, scholars argue over her seemingly innocent tutu. Lacking the durability of wax, plaster, or bronze, the tutus on all versions of *Little Dancer* rapidly wear out and museums and collectors regularly replace them. Most statues wear a short tutu more characteristic of a modern ballerina. But in the late-20th century, scholars questioned whether a short tutu is accurate. They pointed out that in all of Degas' paintings and drawings of the ballet, young dancers all wore knee-length tutus. As a result, Joslyn Art Museum changed the design of the tutu to more resemble the fashion of the 19th century. Today, Joslyn's *Little Dancer* is one of the only versions that wears the historically accurate knee-length design. But some people disagree and argue that even though the knee-length tutu is more historically accurate, the shorter design is still appropriate. Degas' wax figurines were kept in his studio throughout his career. They were fragile, and many of them, including *Little Dancer*, were damaged. The original tutu was frayed and sagging, and no longer reached down to her knees. In 1917, when the foundry made plaster and bronze casts of the original wax, they copied the length of the frayed and shortened tutu instead of the long and full original. This shorter design caught on, and it is common to see on most figures on view. While the long skirt may be more accurate to the sculpture in 1881, it was not in 1917. Some argue that the short skirt is more appropriate because it is true to the damaged condition of the artwork when it was cast into plaster.

Sculptural Origins and Legacy

Famous for his artistic experimentation, Edgar Degas began sculpting in the 1880s, relatively late in his career. He created his hand-molded figures from wax, a popular sculptural medium during that time. He produced over 100 wax figures. *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old*, one of Degas' earliest and largest sculptures, was created between 1878-1881. As part of his preparations, he sketched numerous pastel studies and created small wax figurines as he experimented with different poses. He used a young, fourteen year old Belgian ballet student named Marie Van Goethem as his model. Marie was one of many young dancers who hoped to develop a successful career on stage. While she went on to dance professionally, Marie was known primarily for her services as an artist's model, a career perhaps inspired by her time with Degas.

Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878-1881, pigmented beeswax, clay, metal armature, rope, paintbrushes, human hair, silk & linen ribbon, cotton faille bodice, cotton & silk tutu, linen slippers, on wooden base, 38 15/16 x 13 11/16 x 13 7/8 in., National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1999.80.28

In order to mold the translucent brown wax into the figure of the dancer, Degas rigged a "skeleton" made from hemp rope and wire. He then applied the wax to this frame, carefully forming the dancer's figure by hand. In order to make the sculpture

Famous for his artistic experimentation, Edgar Degas began sculpting in the 1880s, relatively late in his career. He created his hand-molded figures from wax, a popular sculptural medium during that time. He produced over 100 wax figures. *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old*, one of Degas' earliest and largest sculptures, was created between 1878-1881. As part of his preparations, he sketched numerous pastel studies and created small wax figurines as he experimented with different poses. He used a young, fourteen year old Belgian ballet student named Marie Van Goethem as his model. Marie was one of many young dancers who hoped to develop a successful career on stage. While she went on to dance professionally, Marie was known primarily for her services as an artist's model, a career perhaps inspired by her time with Degas.

Edgar Degas, *Three Studies of a Dancer in Fourth Position*, 1879-1880, charcoal and pastel with stumping, and touches of brush and black wash, on greyish-tan laid paper with blue fibers, laid down on gray wove paper, 18 7/8 x 24 1/2 in., Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Adele R. Levy, 1962.703; Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, plaster cast possibly 1920/1921, after original wax modelled 1878-1881, painted plaster base, 39 1/8 x 13 3/4 x 14 1/8 in., National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1985.64.62

Appear more lifelike, Degas added a horsehair wig, green satin ribbon, silk bodice, and a knee-length skirt made by a local doll-maker. He rubbed the wax into the clothing to blend it with the appearance of the figure. Few sculptors before Degas used fabric props in sculptures of any medium, making his decision shocking for many. In 1881, Degas briefly displayed the work as "The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer" at the sixth Impressionist exhibition. It was the only time he exhibited a sculpture, instead keeping them in his studio for the remainder of his life. After his death, the wax sculptures, including *Little Dancer*, were discovered in his studio. Under the authority of the estate, over twenty bronze versions, also "dressed" with a ribbon and tutu, were cast by the Paris master founder Adrien A. Hébrard. The *Little Dancer* wax figure was so fragile, the foundry made two plaster versions that could be used to cast bronze copies. Joslyn's plaster figure is the model from which the bronzes were cast.



EDGAR DEGAS
French, 1834–1917

**LITTLE DANCER, FOURTEEN YEARS OLD
(LA PETIT DANSEUSE DE QUATORZE ANS)**
1881, cast ca. 1920–21, plaster, 39 x 19 1/2 x 20 in.

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Gift of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc., New York
1971.271.a-b