

## Degas' Sculptures - A Few Facts

The total number of Degas' sculptures is unknown but reported to exceed 500 across a range of dancers, horses and ladies washing. About 150 were found in his apartment and studio after his death, all showing at least some signs of deterioration. Much of this deterioration can be traced back to the fact that Degas had never received any formal training in the techniques of sculpting and had worked largely in wax, clay or plasteline (a mixture of clay and oil) or a mix of all three. Unfortunately, all these materials had different drying rates so!



*In the H. O. Havemeyer Collection*

During his lifetime none of Degas' sculptures was cast and only the wax model of "Little Dancer, Aged 14" was named and exhibited by him. Even she missed her first public appearance at the Salon of 1880 as the case intended for her display remained empty for the duration. With the natural theatrical timing of her sex, Little Dancer again failed to appear in her case for the opening of the 1881 Salon but materialised a few days later to a melange of great critical and public rapture and criticism.

"Little Dancer", much liked by at least some of the Parisian audience was not cast during Degas lifetime.

Although Renoir (1841-1919) acclaimed Degas as the world's greatest sculptor -even eclipsing Rodin (1840-1917) - (by coincidence, Renoir was a rival painter rather than a rival sculptor) it is not at all clear that Degas saw himself as a pursuer of that profession. In fact, in an interview he gave to journalist Francois Thiebault-Sisson in 1897, Degas said: "The only reason I made wax figures of animals and humans was for my own satisfaction, not to take time off from painting or drawing, but in order to give my paintings and drawings greater expression, greater ardor and more life."

A clue as to why Degas made his model waxes may lie in the writings of London based, Munich born son of a Danish painter, (and suspect in the Jack the Ripper crime) Walter Sickert (1860-1942). He wrote that in 1910 he had once been invited to Degas studio where the artist had shown him how he used a wax model, a candle and a white sheet to produce different images of a model to help compose paintings.

It is obvious that Degas did not take care of these works. Why? It is not clear whether he simply saw the models as an aide to painting, whether he disliked the funerary feel and colour of bronze or simply wished to be able, as with his paintings, to be able to return repeatedly and change them. Three of his wax models were in fact cast in clay but no more.