

degas little dancer aged fourteen

degas little dancer aged fourteen is one of the most iconic sculptures in art history, representing a young ballet student captured with exceptional realism and emotion. Created by the French artist Edgar Degas in the late 19th century, this work captures the delicate balance between youthful innocence and the rigorous discipline of ballet. The sculpture not only reflects Degas's fascination with dance but also offers a glimpse into the life of a young dancer during that era. This article explores the historical context, artistic techniques, symbolism, and legacy of Degas's little dancer aged fourteen. By delving into the background of the model, the sculpture's creation process, and its impact on the art world, readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of this masterpiece. The following sections will guide through the detailed exploration of this remarkable work of art.

- Historical Context of Degas's Little Dancer Aged Fourteen
- Artistic Techniques and Materials Used
- The Model: Marie van Goethem
- Symbolism and Interpretation
- Reception and Legacy of the Sculpture

Historical Context of Degas's Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

Edgar Degas created his sculpture of the little dancer aged fourteen during the 1880s, a period marked by significant changes in the art world and society. This era witnessed the rise of Impressionism, with Degas himself being a prominent figure in this movement, though his style often diverged from other Impressionists. The sculpture was first exhibited in 1881 at the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition in Paris. It stood out because of its innovative use of mixed media and its candid portrayal of a young ballet student, which was unconventional compared to the idealized forms typically seen in sculpture at the time.

Art Scene in Late 19th Century France

The late 19th century French art scene was characterized by experimentation and breaking away from classical traditions. Artists sought to capture modern life and its nuances, often focusing on everyday subjects rather than mythological or historical themes. Degas's little dancer aged fourteen fits into this context by depicting a real-life figure from the Paris Opera Ballet, emphasizing realism and the raw physicality of dance.

Social and Cultural Environment

The social backdrop of the sculpture includes the rigorous and demanding world of ballet training, especially for young girls from modest backgrounds. Ballet schools were often strict institutions, and many young dancers faced harsh conditions. Degas's work reflects this reality, portraying the dancer not as an ethereal figure but as a hardworking adolescent in the midst of her demanding routine.

Artistic Techniques and Materials Used

Degas's little dancer aged fourteen is notable for its innovative use of materials and techniques that contribute to its lifelike appearance. Unlike traditional sculptures made solely of bronze or marble, Degas incorporated mixed media elements to enhance realism. The original sculpture combined bronze with real fabric, a satin ribbon, and a wig made of real hair, which was groundbreaking at the time.

Mixed Media Approach

The use of mixed media allowed Degas to blur the boundaries between sculpture and reality. The tutu worn by the dancer was made from actual fabric, and the hair was carefully arranged to mimic the style of a young ballet student. This approach brought a tactile dimension to the sculpture that invited viewers to engage with it on a more intimate level.

Sculpting Techniques

Degas employed wax modeling to create the original figure, which was later cast in bronze. The wax allowed for intricate detailing, especially in the facial features and posture. The pose itself, with the dancer standing in a poised yet relaxed position, captures a moment of stillness amid movement, demonstrating Degas's mastery of representing the human form in motion.

The Model: Marie van Goethem

The little dancer aged fourteen was modeled after Marie van Goethem, a young student at the Paris Opera Ballet School. Marie was one of many young girls who aspired to become professional dancers, often coming from working-class families. Degas's decision to portray Marie adds a layer of social commentary to the sculpture, highlighting the realities faced by these young performers.

Background of Marie van Goethem

Marie van Goethem was born into a modest family and joined the ballet school as a teenager. Her life was representative of many young dancers who balanced the demands

of training with the challenges of economic hardship. Historical records suggest that Marie's career as a dancer was brief, but her legacy endures through Degas's sculpture.

Significance of the Model Choice

Choosing a real-life model like Marie was significant for Degas, as it grounded the sculpture in authenticity. It was not merely an idealized form but a portrait of a specific individual. This choice contributed to the emotional depth and realism that distinguishes the little dancer aged fourteen from other sculptures of the period.

Symbolism and Interpretation

The sculpture of Degas's little dancer aged fourteen carries rich symbolic meaning, reflecting themes of youth, discipline, and the duality between vulnerability and strength. The figure's posture and expression convey a complex blend of innocence and determination, inviting varied interpretations from art critics and historians.

Youth and Innocence

The tender age of the dancer, fourteen, underscores the theme of youth. Her delicate features and slender physique evoke innocence, yet the firmness of her stance suggests growing maturity. This juxtaposition reflects the transitional phase of adolescence, especially within the demanding environment of ballet.

Discipline and Aspiration

The sculpture also symbolizes the discipline intrinsic to ballet training. The dancer's posture is controlled and precise, embodying the rigorous physical and mental demands placed on young performers. At the same time, the upward gaze and poised stance hint at aspiration and hope for a future career on stage.

Social Commentary

Beyond aesthetics, the sculpture comments on the social realities of young dancers. It subtly critiques the exploitation and hardships endured by these girls, many of whom faced precarious futures. Degas's realistic portrayal challenges idealized notions of ballet by presenting a truthful depiction of the dancer's world.

Reception and Legacy of the Sculpture

Upon its initial exhibition, Degas's little dancer aged fourteen received a mixed reception, with some critics praising its innovation and realism, while others found it unsettling or unconventional. Over time, however, the sculpture has become celebrated as a

masterpiece that broke new ground in both technique and subject matter.

Initial Critical Response

The sculpture's realistic portrayal and use of mixed media shocked some contemporary viewers. Critics were divided, with some considering the figure too raw or unidealized for public display. Despite this, the piece attracted attention and debate, marking a turning point in modern sculpture.

Influence on Modern Art

Degas's approach influenced subsequent generations of artists by demonstrating the potential of mixed media and realism in sculpture. The little dancer aged fourteen paved the way for more experimental and expressive forms of art, bridging traditional techniques with modern sensibilities.

Continued Popularity

Today, Degas's little dancer aged fourteen is housed in major museums worldwide and remains a subject of scholarly study and public fascination. Its enduring popularity attests to its artistic significance and the timeless appeal of its subject matter.

Key Features of Degas's Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

- Created by Edgar Degas in the early 1880s
- Modelled after Marie van Goethem, a young ballet student
- Original made of wax with real fabric and hair, later cast in bronze
- Depicts a fourteen-year-old ballet dancer in a poised, naturalistic stance
- Symbolizes the tension between youth, discipline, and aspiration
- Mixed critical reception initially but now a celebrated masterpiece
- Influential in the development of modern sculpture and mixed media art

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is the subject of Edgar Degas' sculpture 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

The subject of Degas' sculpture 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' is Marie van Goethem, a young ballet student at the Paris Opera Ballet who posed for the artist when she was about fourteen years old.

What materials did Degas use for 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

Degas originally created 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' using wax, fabric, and real hair, with a tutu and a ribbon, before it was later cast in bronze.

Why was 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' controversial when it was first exhibited?

The sculpture was controversial because it depicted a realistic and unidealized young dancer with a somewhat provocative and gritty appearance, challenging the traditional notions of beauty in art at the time.

How does 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' reflect Degas' interest in ballet?

'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' captures the grace and discipline of ballet while also showing the physical and emotional realities of a young dancer's life, reflecting Degas' fascination with the world of ballet and his commitment to realism.

Where can one see the original 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' sculpture today?

The original wax model of 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' is housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., while bronze editions of the sculpture are displayed in various museums worldwide.

What impact did 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' have on modern sculpture?

'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' is considered a groundbreaking work that introduced a new level of realism and emotional depth to sculpture, influencing modern artists to explore everyday subjects with honesty and expressiveness.

Additional Resources

1. *Degas and the Little Dancer: A Study in Impressionism*

This book explores Edgar Degas's iconic sculpture, "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen," delving into the historical context and artistic techniques behind the work. It provides insights into Degas's fascination with ballet and his innovative use of materials like real fabric and hair. The narrative also discusses the reception of the sculpture when it was first exhibited in the late 19th century.

2. *The Life and Times of Marie van Goethem: The Little Dancer*

Focusing on the young ballerina who inspired Degas's sculpture, this biography sheds light on Marie van Goethem's life in Paris during the 1880s. It examines the challenges faced by a young dancer in a competitive and often harsh environment. The book also contextualizes her story within the broader world of ballet and Parisian society.

3. *Impressionism and Ballet: The Artistic Vision of Edgar Degas*

This volume investigates the intersection of Impressionism and dance in Degas's work, emphasizing his depictions of ballerinas. It discusses how Degas captured movement, light, and the behind-the-scenes reality of ballet. The text highlights "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen" as a pivotal piece representing this fusion of art and performance.

4. *Sculpting Movement: The Art of Edgar Degas*

An in-depth analysis of Degas's sculptural techniques, this book focuses on how he conveyed motion and emotion through three-dimensional forms. It covers the creation process of "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen," including the use of mixed media. The book also compares Degas's sculptures to his paintings and drawings of dancers.

5. *The Paris Ballet Scene in the 19th Century*

Providing historical context, this book explores the Parisian ballet world during Degas's era. It highlights the social and economic conditions of dancers, including young girls like Marie van Goethem. The narrative helps readers understand the environment that shaped the subject of "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen."

6. *From Canvas to Bronze: The Evolution of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*

This work traces the journey of Degas's "Little Dancer" from initial sketches and wax models to the final bronze sculptures produced posthumously. It discusses the challenges of preserving Degas's original vision and the role of modern foundries in bringing the sculpture to life for contemporary audiences.

7. *Behind the Curtain: Ballet and Society in Edgar Degas's Time*

This book delves into the societal dynamics surrounding ballet in late 19th-century France, including issues of class, gender, and exploitation. It examines how these themes are reflected in Degas's portrayal of young dancers, with a special focus on "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen." The author draws on historical documents and artworks to paint a vivid picture of the era.

8. *Edgar Degas: The Dancer's Gaze*

A comprehensive study of Degas's artistic focus on dancers, this book analyzes his unique perspective and stylistic choices. It situates "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen" within his broader oeuvre, highlighting its significance as a groundbreaking work. The book also explores Degas's influence on subsequent generations of artists.

9. *The Little Dancer: Art, Childhood, and Realism*

This title examines the themes of childhood and realism in Degas's sculpture, discussing how "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen" challenges traditional idealized representations of young girls. It critiques the social implications of portraying a working-class child in art and explores the emotional depth conveyed through the figure's posture and expression.

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