

Degas Little Dancer Aged Fourteen



Degas' Little Dancer Aged Fourteen is one of the most iconic sculptures in the history of art, representing the essence of Impressionism and the unique intersection of realism and abstraction in the late 19th century. This remarkable work of art, created by the French artist Edgar Degas, not only captures the beauty of youth but also reflects the complex social dynamics of the ballet world during that time. In this article, we will explore the significance of the sculpture, its artistic techniques, the

model behind the piece, and its lasting impact on the art world.

Historical Context

The Rise of Impressionism

In the late 19th century, the Impressionist movement emerged as a reaction against the academic standards of the time. Artists sought to capture fleeting moments of modern life, emphasizing light and color over detailed realism. Edgar Degas, although often associated with Impressionism, had a unique approach that blended traditional techniques with innovative ideas.

The Ballet Scene in Paris

The Parisian ballet scene was a major cultural phenomenon during Degas' lifetime. The Opéra de Paris was a central hub for artistic activity, attracting a diverse crowd of spectators, dancers, and artists. Ballet dancers were seen as both entertainers and symbols of beauty and grace, yet their lives were often marked by hardship and competition.

Degas and His Artistic Vision

The Creation of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

Degas began working on Little Dancer Aged Fourteen in the early 1880s, inspired by his fascination with ballet and the young dancers who populated the Opéra. The sculpture was not merely a representation of a dancer; it was a study of movement, form, and the emotional depth of youth.

1. Materials: Degas initially created the sculpture in wax, a medium that allowed him to capture

intricate details and textures. Later, it was cast in bronze using the lost-wax process, a technique that has been used for centuries in sculpture.

2. Dimensions: The sculpture stands at approximately 38 inches tall, a size that emphasizes the delicate yet strong presence of the dancer.

3. Pose and Expression: The pose of the dancer is both natural and poised, reflecting the everyday movements of a young girl in training. Her expression is contemplative, hinting at the struggles and aspirations that come with youth.

Technique and Style

Degas employed a variety of techniques that set *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* apart from other sculptures of the time.

- Realism: The attention to anatomical accuracy and the depiction of the dancer's attire reflect a commitment to realism, which was characteristic of Degas' work.
- Texture: The use of wax allowed Degas to create a lifelike texture that mimicked the fabric of the dancer's tutu and the softness of her skin.
- Mixed Media: Degas took an innovative approach by incorporating real materials into the sculpture. The original piece featured a tutu made of muslin and a satin ribbon, which added a tactile quality to the work.

The Model: Marie van Goethem

A Glimpse into the Life of the Dancer

The model for *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was Marie van Goethem, a young ballet student at the Paris Opéra. Born in 1865, she was the daughter of a poor family and entered the ballet school to help support her siblings.

- Background: Marie came from a modest background, and her life in the ballet world was fraught with challenges. Many young dancers faced financial insecurity and harsh competition.
- Relationship with Degas: Degas was known to have a keen interest in the lives of his subjects. His relationship with Marie was likely one of mentorship and artistic fascination, as he sought to capture the essence of her experience as a dancer.

The Impact of Marie on Degas' Work

Marie van Goethem's presence in Degas' work goes beyond mere representation. She embodied the spirit of youthful aspiration and determination, which resonated deeply with Degas.

- Symbol of the Ballet: Through her, Degas explored themes of beauty and struggle, capturing the duality of a dancer's life.
- Inspiration for Future Works: Marie's influence extended beyond this single sculpture, as she appears in several of Degas' paintings and pastels, showcasing the artist's ongoing fascination with ballet.

Reception and Legacy

Initial Reception

When *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was first exhibited at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1881, it garnered a mixed response from critics and the public.

- Controversy: Some viewers were shocked by the unconventional choice of a young girl as a subject and the realism of the sculpture. The use of mixed media also raised eyebrows, as it was an unconventional approach for the time.
- Critics' Views: Despite the controversy, many praised the piece for its emotional depth and innovative technique. Critics noted that it transcended the boundaries of traditional sculpture, inviting viewers to engage with the subject on a personal level.

Enduring Influence

Little Dancer Aged Fourteen has continued to captivate audiences for over a century. Its influence can be seen across various artistic movements and disciplines.

- Artistic Influence: The sculpture has inspired countless artists to explore themes of youth, beauty, and the human condition. Modern sculptors often cite Degas as a key influence in their work.
- Cultural Impact: The piece has become a symbol of ballet and the arts, representing the dream of many young dancers who aspire to grace the stage.

Conclusion

Degas' Little Dancer Aged Fourteen is more than just a sculpture; it is a poignant exploration of youth, aspiration, and the complexities of the ballet world. Through his innovative techniques and deep understanding of his subject, Degas created a timeless piece that continues to resonate with audiences today. As viewers stand before this remarkable work, they are reminded not only of the beauty of dance but also of the struggles and dreams that define the human experience. The legacy of Little Dancer Aged Fourteen endures, capturing the imagination of new generations and solidifying Edgar Degas' place in the pantheon of great artists.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'Degas' Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' known for?

'Degas' Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' is a famous sculpture by Edgar Degas that captures the essence of a young ballet dancer in a moment of stillness, showcasing the artist's interest in movement and realism.

What materials were used in the creation of 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

Degas originally created the sculpture using a combination of wax, fabric, and a wooden base, which was later cast in bronze after his death.

Why is 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' considered groundbreaking?

The sculpture is considered groundbreaking because it was one of the first to depict a young girl in a naturalistic pose, breaking away from the traditional, idealized representations of women in art.

What age was the model for 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

The model for 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' was a real ballet student named Marie van Goethem, who was just fourteen years old at the time.

How did audiences initially react to 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

When it was first exhibited in 1881, the sculpture received mixed reactions; some praised its realism while others were shocked by its unconventional representation of a young girl.

What themes does Degas explore in 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

Degas explores themes of youth, innocence, and the world of ballet, highlighting the dedication and struggles faced by young dancers.

What influence did 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' have on modern art?

'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' has influenced modern art by encouraging artists to explore realism and the human experience, often focusing on everyday subjects and movements.

Where can 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' be viewed today?

'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen' is part of the collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and is often exhibited in various art institutions around the world.

What is the significance of the clothing on 'Little Dancer Aged Fourteen'?

The clothing, made from real fabric, adds an element of authenticity and texture to the sculpture, enhancing the viewer's connection to the dancer's world and the reality of ballet life.

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