

2 THE MAKING OF THE SCULPTURE

"A wax dancer whose naturalism is strangely attractive, troubling, ..." ¹

Degas was effectively the founder of a distinguished line of untaught sculptor-painters in the modern age, soon to include Paul Gauguin and, most famously, to be followed by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in the early twentieth century. As an amateur embarking on the first large-scale sculpture of his career, Degas - like his successors - was obliged to confront the simplest practical matters as well as the grander pretensions of his project. Some of the former have already been touched on; the selection of a model from among the "rats" at the Opera and the choice of her pose, for example, and the use to be made of the artist's pre-existing "stock" of drawn and painted images. At a technical level, there was the challenge of constructing the meter-high wax figure - a formidable task for a virtual beginner - and of dressing it in specially made, reduced-scale tutu, bodice, wig, and dancing shoes. Common to all these considerations was an even more fundamental question: that of the status of Degas' semi-private modeling venture in the very competitive world of nineteenth-century sculpture. Was Degas making this image of a young dancer to assist him with his picture making, in the way that his later wax horses, ballerinas, and bather-figures appear to have been conceived, or was it intended from the start for public display, as a bold intervention in the sculptural exchanges of his day? If the latter, how well acquainted was Degas with the crosscurrents of opinion in the contemporary medium, and how appropriate or otherwise was his contribution to them? In short, was the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* merely an eccentric studio experiment, or was it to be an informed, radical, and eye-catching work of three-dimensional art?

In his 1976 monograph on the artist, Charles Millard asserted that "Degas' sculpture is a very paradigm of the development of sculpture in nineteenth-century France, a resume of its statements and problems, its exploratory and modern strains."² Among the few authors to have attempted to locate the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in the era's broader sculptural concerns - which he groups together as the "monumental," the "classical," and the "romantic and contemporary" - Millard stressed the historic roots of Degas' formation and established a number of pioneering links with the technical debates of the age. The extent of Degas' participation in this milieu, however, has remained a matter of uncertainty for many, exacerbated by his reputation as an untaught modeler and - with the solitary exception of the *Little Dancer* - a reluctant exhibitor. In recent years there has been a decisive shift in our perception of Degas the amateur sculptor. If, as we increasingly believe, Degas' experiments in wax, clay, and mixed materials were openly conducted, often in the company of friends who were professionals; if certain of his finished models were proudly presented in his apartment and almost casually accessible in his studio to visiting artists, critics, and



Fig. i i Jean-Auguste Barre, *Marie Taglioni in "La Sylphide,"* 1837, bronze, 17³/₄ in. (45 cm), Musee des Arts decoratifs, Paris.

dealers; if several attempts were made during Degas' lifetime to cast his wax and clay sculptures into more durable materials; and if the reputation of some of his three-dimensional achievements - most notably the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* - persisted throughout his career, then the image of Degas as a sculptural recluse must finally be reassessed.'

As our understanding of French sculpture in the second half of the nineteenth century has deepened, so Millard's claim for the paradigmatic status of Degas' work has been progressively vindicated. Whether charting the evolution of realism or studying sculpture within the Impressionist enterprise, following the arguments that raged around polychromy or the decline of the public monument, the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* is encountered near the center of each argument or at the threshold of innovation. In retrospect, Degas' fabrication between 1878 and 1881 of a costumed wax statuette of an ordinary Parisian adolescent seems almost prescient, anticipating and simultaneously embodying a revolution in sculpture and a radical re-evaluation of its relationship to the spectator and the material world. Far from being prophetic, of course, the making of the *Little Dancer* was a precisely calculated maneuver by an artist conversant with many of the personalities - including sculptors and critics, theorists and collectors - with whom he was engaged. While advances have been made in the integration of Degas' sculpture with the art of his fellow Impressionists, insufficient attention has been paid to his documented and sometimes enthusiastic engagement with practitioners from more conservative traditions. Not only did Degas regularly scrutinize the Salons and the International Exhibitions of these years (as late as 1891, Berthe Morisot reported that he still "stayed in the Salon from morning till night") but he could look back on first-hand acquaintance with a range of professional and occasional sculptors, from his friends Dr. Camus and Gustave Moreau to the aspiring Joseph Cuvelier and the celebrated Henri Chapu, while his awareness of the achievements of Carpeaux, Dubois, Meissonier, and Bartholome is well attested.' In the present study, we can only single out a few of these strands, emphasizing those largely overlooked in earlier examinations of the *Little Dancer* and those most closely related to its manufacture. But by concentrating on prominent commentators and sculptors or works that Degas is known to have encountered, we can significantly advance Millard's claim and locate the *Little Dancer* more securely in its time.

Jean-Auguste Barre's study *Marie Taglioni in "La Sylphide"* (fig. i i) is a winsome reminder of one of the crucial precedents Degas must have consulted as he began the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*: that of the existing tradition of ballet sculpture. Barre was a minor figure with a modest reputation for medals and portrait busts, and his depictions of two leading ballerinas of the day, Taglioni and Fanny Elssler (fig. 12), tended to reiterate the conventional view of the dancer and her attributes. In both sculptures, the public spectacle of the ballet has provided the subject, as a daintily dressed *etoile* steps through her performance on a miniature stage and the intricacies of her costume are itemized for our delight. The figure of Elssler is conspicuous in this respect, with a finely worked silk and lace outfit appropriate to her "Spanish" role in *Le Diable boiteux* and minutely modeled bouquets of roses at her feet, and it is no surprise to find that this elegant object was also produced as a luxurious silvered bronze.' The two works are thought to have been unveiled at the Salon of 1837, when Taglioni and Elssler were both in their mid twenties, representing the dancers at the height of their celebrity rather than in a moment of obscure apprenticeship, like that chosen by Degas for his studies of Marie van Goethem. Despite these fundamental differences, a substantial link with Degas can



Fig. 12 Jean-Auguste Barre, *Fanny Elssler*, 1837, silvered bronze, 16/8 in. (42.9 cm), The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mrs. Alma de Bretteville Spreckels.

he established in the case of each of Barre's sculptures, through the family of his long-established friends, the Rouarts. The brothers Alexis and Henri Rouart were collectors of wide and imaginative taste, amassing Egyptian mummies and Tanagra figurines, lithographs by Daumier and paintings by Corot, Millet, and the Impressionists, which they famously made available to visitors young and old.¹ A confirmed bachelor, Degas regarded their apartments as extensions of his home, and it was there that he would have become familiar with both Barre images, a bronze cast of the figure of Taglioni in Alexis' collection and the original plaster statuette of Elssler among Henri's extensive holdings. Given that the two brothers were also ardent collectors of pictures by Degas himself, with a pronounced preference for his ballet scenes, the opportunity for direct comparison of the dance imagery of successive generations - not just for the Rouarts but for their visiting artist-friend - must have been continuous and irresistible.

Predictable though they may be, Barre's bronzes remind us that ballet and sculpture enjoyed a subtle and often reciprocal association throughout much of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, dance pupils were often urged to emulate the great pictures and sculptures of the past: in 1820, Charles Blasis had demanded that "A dancer should be able, at any moment, to provide a model for a painter or sculptor," words that were closely echoed in Georges Duval's pedagogical text published shortly before the making of the *Little Dancers*. In their working lives, dancers found themselves in frequent juxtaposition with their sculptural counterparts, most obviously in the figures that ornamented the facade and interior of the rue Le Peletier theater and the Gamier Opera, but also in certain of their everyday rehearsal rooms. An anonymous lithograph from *Charivari* of 1846 (fig. 13) shows one such encounter, where a "rat" and her companions inspect a bust by Houdon of the dancer Jacqueline Guimard, while puzzling over the practice of recording celebrated ballerinas without showing their legs.² Such a bust is known to have been present in the rue Le Peletier dance foyer, appearing in numerous prints of the scene and - as a curious, half-remembered variant - in a fan painting by Degas from the late 1870s.³ Visitors to the Palais Gamier were regularly and publicly exposed to Carpeaux's larger-than-life-size *The Dance*, whose naked and very unballletic marble dancers scandalized Paris when they first appeared in 1869.⁴ One consequence of the notoriety of the work was Carpeaux's decision to capitalize on his fame by supervising casts and reduced-scale replicas of *The Dance* in a variety of media. Another of Carpeaux's creations, the portrait bust of *Eugenie Fiocre* (the dancer Degas had painted in the 1860s) was similarly produced in a number of variants, including the marble shown at the 1870 Salon, a plaster now in the Musee d'Orsay, and a more popular reduction in terracotta.⁵ Drawn to it perhaps by nostalgia, Degas himself apparently acquired a copy of the latter at some unspecified date, Daniel Halevy telling us that the artist would still caress it with affection in his half-blind old age.⁶

Degas' documented awareness of the existing patterns of dance sculpture, from classical prototypes to works by a wide variety of his immediate contemporaries, gives added purposefulness to his own achievement in the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Far from being overshadowed by his antecedents, Degas seems to have reversed the majority of their assumptions, from such fundamental questions as their choice of subject, medium, and finish to the means of presenting the completed object to the public. Where Barre had opted for a moment of spectacle, Degas chose the banality of the rehearsal room; where a product of Romanticism, such as Francisque Joseph Duret's acclaimed *Dancing Neapolitan*



Fig. 13 Anon., *The Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, lithograph, from *Charivari*, 21 February, 1846.

Boy of 1833, explored the lyrical, pantheistic energies of the dance, Degas' figure emphasized inertia; and where the mannered classicism of James Pradier's *Dance with a Scarf* exploited the sinuousness of bronze, the *Little Dancer* stressed coarseness of surface and quotidian emotion. Closer to the historical example of Barre, Degas again rejected the "cabinet" scale and implicit decorativeness of hip output, along with the cult of personality it entailed. Houdon, Barre, and Carpeaux had all - in their different registers - immortalized the celebrities of their day or aspired to embody the spirit of the dance itself (Houdon's bust in the dance foyer was named after the muse of the dance, *Terpsichore*). By contrast, the *Little Dancer* was anonymous and insignificant, modeled on a scale that was neither charmingly miniature nor grandiose, and made in materials that were defiantly resistant to most forms of replication. His image is particular, domestic, and unyielding, juxtaposing the brute facts of sculpture with the daily realities of the dance for the first time in the history of either medium. If painted representation of such subjects had become almost commonplace by this date, we search in vain for their equivalents in three dimensions, either at the Salon or in the more informal products of artists' studios." Indeed, so radical was Degas' departure that it was more than a generation before other sculptors followed his lead, when the likes of Rupert Carabin, Pavel Troubetzkoi, and Leonetto Cappiello extended his examination of the less decorous world of the dance into the vernacular of the own age.¹⁵

A further consideration uniting the depiction of the dance with the wide issues of sculpture, and of largely overlooked significance in the case of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, was that of the depiction of infants, children, and adolescents. The mid century saw an extraordinary proliferation of such images not just in painted family portraits and instructive prints, but in reliefs, marble carvings, cast bronzes, polished marbles, and monuments on almost every street. Perhaps encouraged by the reception of Francois Joseph Bosio's full-size *Henri IV as a Child*, shown as a plaster in 1822 and cast in silver by order of Louis XVIII renderings of historic and exemplary youths became a regular feature at the annual state-sponsored Salon." Bosio's decision to present Henri in childhood and wearing appropriate sixteenth-century doublet and hose resulted in a form that is oddly - and probably coincidentally - analogous to Degas' *Little Dancer* despite the emphatic historicism and sumptuous finish of the earlier work. Nearer to Degas' own day in style of costume, if not in pose, was Carpeaux's marble group *The Prince Imperial and His Dog Nero* of 1865, a work commissioned by the Emperor that shows the eight-year-old prince at natural scale, clad in contemporary jacket and loose trousers.¹⁷ During the 1870s, this trend toward informality embraced the children of the middle classes and even the picturesque poor, most controversially in works like Vincenzo Gemito's bronzes of hunched, naked urchins and Neapolitan fisherboys. Several of the sculptors who achieve fame with their representations of children belonged to Degas' generation and were known to him personally, like the marble carver Henri Chapu, who had been part of the same circle at the Villa Medici in Rome during Degas' Italian sojourn." When Chapu's life-size *Young Boy* was exhibited at the Salon of 1878, it was widely praised for its easy naturalism, one critic claiming, "It is perfect . . . the marble is treated with extreme suppleness and beneath the folds of cloth ~ sense a body."¹⁹ Given their earlier association and his own current engagement with the *Little Dancer*, Degas would surely have taken note of this confidently and realistically clothed vision of precocious manhood, if only to define the technical and stylistic distance he had traveled from his former colleague.

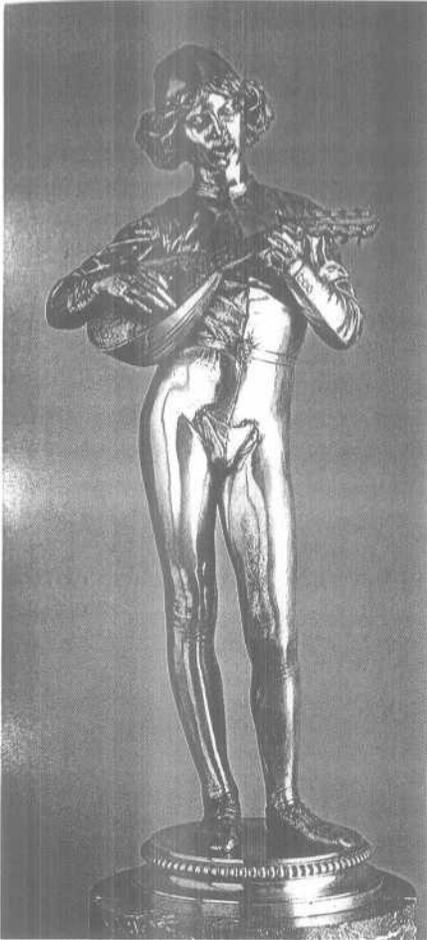


Fig. 14 Paul Dubois, *Florentine Singer of the Fifteenth Century*, 1865, silvered bronze, 61 in. (1.55 m.), Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

Arguably the most critically approved and popularly acclaimed emblem of youth in the years immediately prior to the *Little Dancer*, however, was Paul Dubois' life-size *Florentine Singer of the Fifteenth Century* (fig. 14). Awarded a medal of honor when it was presented as a plaster at the 1865 Salon (the exhibition at which Degas made his own debut as a painter), the work was translated into silvered bronze by order of the state and subsequently mass-produced in no less than six alternative sizes by the Barbedienne foundry and three reduced-scale versions in terracotta by the Manufacture de Sevres.²⁰ Installed in the Musee du Luxembourg, which contained the foremost collection of modern painting and sculpture in Paris, Dubois' figure won over a range of opinion by combining a high degree of finish with a relaxed demeanor, and a picturesque theme with evident wholesomeness. This fusion of qualities was specifically welcomed by its audience, Paul Mantz (who was to become one of the harsher critics of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*) claiming that "the head, a happy mingling of rusticity and finesse, is really that of a Florentine of the glorious age: the body, supple and nervous, is full of youth and elegance."²¹ As with Bosio's *Henri IV as a Child*, we can hardly overlook certain superficial similarities between this icon of adolescence and Degas' wax statuette; though Dubois' subject was male, he displays a conspicuous pair of bestockinged legs and a finely detailed costume, while his broadly symmetrical pose depends on a distribution of weight that is generically akin to that of the *Little Dancer*. Separated by more than a decade, the two works nevertheless share an ambition to represent the qualities of incipient adulthood in a single, resonant image, an identity of purpose that Degas may have signaled in his witty echoes of the cadences of Dubois' title.²²

The possibility that the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was a self-conscious, even mischief-making response to the renowned *Florentine Singer of the Fifteenth Century* - and that Degas was aware of more general parallels between Dubois' career and his own - deserves consideration for a number of reasons. Paul Valery tells us of Degas' respect in later life for Dubois' massive equestrian statue of *Joan of Arc* (a youthful heroine of another age), one of very few specific works of contemporary sculpture the artist is known to have admired." Born just five years earlier than Degas into a comparable bourgeois family, Paul Dubois preceded him at the classically based Lycee Louis-le-Grand and likewise spent a brief spell at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, then followed the younger artist in several years of independently financed study in Italy." If we cannot confirm Jeanne Fevre's assertion that the two men met in Rome in 1859, when Degas is said to have mixed with "Leon Bonnat, Gustave Moreau, Georges Bizet, Dubois and Chapu," it is beyond doubt that they developed a similar passion for Italian Renaissance art and planned near-identical works - such as their variants on the theme of a striding, youthful John the Baptist - at this time.²⁵ As both attempted to establish themselves in Paris in the 1860s, it was Dubois who clung most stubbornly to his Italianate roots, while sharing some common ground with Degas in his descriptive portraits of contemporary musicians, painters, and scientists, such as the bust of *Louis Pasteur* exhibited in 1880.²⁶ Despite the divergence of their careers and public imagery, Dubois may well have represented a model of conventional technical practice of some significance for the untutored Degas, a possibility strengthened by parallels in their procedures; Dubois worked as both sculptor and painter, typically defining his three-dimensional subject in a sequence of closely related drawings; similarly, Dubois often chose to develop his forms in wax, ranging from rapidly improvised sketches that might incorporate other materials to full-scale figures;

and, predominantly, Dubois remained an instinctive modeler, rather than a carver of marble or stone.²⁷

In 1881, when the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* was first unveiled, the memory of Dubois' *Florentine Singer* was still very much alive in the sculptural mind of Paris. Both Eugene Guillaume and Jules Buisson referred nostalgically to Dubois' figure in their Salon criticism of that year, Guillaume noting its persistent but positive influence on younger artists and Buisson approving its modest dimensions, which he believed were better suited to the economic circumstances of the present than the grand monuments to which they were accustomed.²⁸ His approving description of figures like those of Dubois as "cabinet sculpture" - whether in the original version installed at the Musee du Luxembourg or in its many smaller-scale offspring - represents a more positive view of the mass-production of works by Bosio, Carpeaux, Barre, and others, a pattern deplored as early as 1846 by Charles Baudelaire. Complaining that the sculptors of his day belonged to a "vast workshop" willing to reduce the great art of the past to "match-boxes, goldsmiths' motifs, busts and bas-reliefs" and "cigar- and shawl-boxes," Baudelaire argued that "there are no childish trivialities which the sculptor will not dare."²⁹ Part of this trend toward "a drawing-room or a bedroom art," as Baudelaire correctly predicted, was a taste for "trifling prettiness" over "grandeur," and an indulgence in extravagantly detailed carving and modeling of hair, fabrics, jewelry, and costume." Not confined to figures of children and youths, this tendency undoubtedly contributed to the appeal of popular favorites like the *Florentine Singer* and Chapu's *Young Boy*, but was seen by a growing number as a blight on the seriousness of modern sculpture. Singling out examples of such virtuosity by exhibitors from Italy - who were widely associated with the practice - Anatole de Montaiglon wrote scathingly at the time of the 1878 Exposition Universelle of their "facility" and their aspirations toward sculptural "trompe l'oeil," the "triumph of the practitioner over the sculptor, craft over art, puerile execution over form and idea."³¹

When Joris-Karl Huysmans welcomed the appearance of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* at such length and with such conviction, he, too, referred to such sculptural fashions, if only to dismiss them with his most haughty rhetoric. Hailing the *Little Dancer* as the "only truly modern attempt at realism in sculpture that I know," Huysmans specifically distanced it from the "once-daring efforts at peasants teaching children to read or giving them a drink, . . . Greek or Renaissance peasants, . . . [and] this abominable sculpture from contemporary Italy, these clock-decorations in wax, these mawkish women constructed from fashion engravings."³² For Huysmans, Degas' achievement was to have turned his back on half-a-dozen contemporary traits at once; against historicism, sentiment, and implausible narrative on the one hand, and the modish delight in verisimilitude and facile contemporaneity on the other. Two years earlier, in an extended Salon review that cited Degas in its first pages, Huysmans had proclaimed that sculpture would either "adapt itself to modern life" or perish; now, with the unveiling of Degas' wax figure, he seems to have felt himself vindicated.³³ Noting the proximity of Degas and Huysmans at this time, Philip Ward Jackson has proposed that the latter may have written his 1879 text with an awareness of Degas' current engagement on the *Little Dancer*: "the likelihood is that he knew her to be waiting in the wings," he suggests.³⁴ Whatever Huysmans' relationship to the work, it is clear that a number of critics shared his sense that sculptural realism and its challenges must be confronted. A leading if essentially conservative sculptor himself, Eugene Guillaume had written at length and with



Fig. 18 Eugene Guillaume, *Napoleon as a Roman Emperor*, 1858, wax on a wooden base, 20³/₄ in. (52.5 cm), Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

considerable shrewdness in 1879 on the representation of the everyday world, articulating both its appeal and its practical and psychological limitations: "To see nature without an intermediary, without prejudice of race or education . . . is something difficult, something impossible for the artist," he explained. "Each art is characterized by something incomplete and fictive, in a word, by some aspect of reality: here, it is color that must be overlooked; there, the dimensions are at fault ... imitation is nothing but a certain appearance of reality.

Degas' challenge in making the *Little Dancer* - to negotiate the pitfalls of "imitation" and the lure of meretricious modernity - is strikingly anticipated in Guillaume's statement. Before examining its consequences, one final practical decision made by Degas the amateur sculptor in approaching his figure must be considered: that of his use of wax. Today, wax has been banished to the periphery of the sculptor's repertoire and, in our rare encounters with the material, is associated with inferior genres (such as artificial flower making) or long redundant and sometimes dubious crafts. In Degas' century, beeswax, paraffin wax, and stearin were ubiquitous substances, not just in domestic and industrial contexts but in virtually every branch of the sculptor's activity. Among the practitioners already discussed, the majority used wax to a lesser or greater extent; Carpeaux, for example, exploited its pliability in a number of small, sensuously improvised models that recall its former use by Michelangelo; the sculptor-critic Guillaume followed established procedure by first modeling his subject in wax on a reduced scale, as in his study for a monument to *Napoleon as a Roman Emperor* (fig. 15), then proceeding to a full-size marble or bronze; while Dubois almost exhausted the medium's possibilities, working at hasty miniature sketches, decorative panels, broad explorations of equestrian groups, and a highly finished, life-size female figure in wax that was later cast in plaster and bronze.³⁶ Many of their sculptor colleagues, such as Barye, Falguiere, Gemito, Meissonier, Mene, Moreau, and Rodin, turned habitually or occasionally to wax, studies in the medium appearing as a regular feature at the annual Salon and even attracting specialist collectors. Far from being eccentric, in the latter part of the nineteenth century wax was among the most commonplace and public of all the sculptor's materials.

In his short story *The Studio*, published in 1881 and designed to enlighten the general reader on the subject of artists' techniques, Degas' close acquaintance Edmond Duranty included a guide to the procedures and materials of the sculptor. Discussing the nature of wax, Duranty explained that it was "a mixture of ordinary wax, turpentine, fat and flour, which can be colored grey, green, brown and red or left in its state of whiteness. Modelling wax costs three or four francs a pound."³⁷ Apart from the necessary pigments, these additives were included to extend and soften the wax so that it could be manipulated according to the sculptor's wishes, then allowed to harden with the passage of time. Such a medium had numerous advantages, not least for the beginner. As Duranty makes clear, it was cheap and freely available; in his introduction to the compendious 1987 *Sculptures en cire de l'ancienne Egypte a fait abstrait*, Jean-Rene Gaborit adds that wax was relatively clean and easy to handle, comparing favorably with terracotta in terms of durability and combining readily with other materials, such as "cardboard, paper, cloth, glass, metallic ornaments, wire or hair." Almost from the beginning of its use in the ancient world, as Degas' contemporaries were well aware, wax had been inseparable from certain modes of painstaking, mixed-media naturalism, notably in portraits of the recently deceased and more ambitious effigies of robed and be-jeweled kings and queens, and - in recent times - in



Fig. 16 Pierre Jules Mene, *Toreador*, 1877, bronze, 21 in. (53 cm), courtesy Sotheby's, London.

displays of the celebrated and notorious in the manner of Madame Tussaud's. As well as its versatility, it was the surface appearance of this "lightly translucent, smooth and matte" substance, when mixed with the appropriate color, that made it ideal for the reproduction, "even the illusion, of the varied appearance of human flesh."³⁹

Anatomical models, dolls and hairdressers' dummies were typically made of tinted wax in Degas' day, often in conjunction with "real" items of clothing and artificial eyes, hair wigs, and lifelike teeth, and it was standard practice to discuss such items in terms of their uncanny "realism."⁴⁰ For similar reasons, modeling with wax was regarded as more akin to painting than to the sculptural skills of carving and construction, and it is hardly a coincidence that several painters admired by Degas, among them the seventeenth-century artist Nicolas Poussin and more immediate peers like Moreau, Meissonier, Gauguin, and Pissarro, made wax figures at some point in their careers.⁴¹ Conversely, a number of generally obscure specialists in wax sculpture tended to favor "painterly" subjects, often involving miniature narratives and the application of color. Wax was chosen by dozens of long-forgotten contributors to the Paris Salon, who annually exhibited portrait studies and groups of birds and animals, the character of many of them evident in such anecdotal titles as *The Wolf and the Stork* and *Terrier with Rats*.⁴² Sullied by its association with popular crafts, its links with sentimental illusionism, and its tendency to become "an activity for amateurs," wax sculpture came heavily burdened with the values of its age.

If the accessibility and painterliness of wax goes some way toward explaining its adoption by an outsider like Degas, it must be set against the equally abundant evidence that many artists of distinction, from the much-decorated Dubois to the more pedestrian Pierre Jules Mene, proudly exhibited their wax sculptures in this same public forum. An important figure in Degas' sculptural background, Joseph Cuvelier, is a minor if typical case in point. Degas seems to have become acquainted with Cuvelier in the late 1860s, when the latter was establishing himself as a specialist in modest-scale groups of horses and riders, such as the forty-centimeter-high *Portrait of Monsieur Baude* included in its wax form at the Salon of 1869.⁴⁴ Though Cuvelier was killed while serving in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, his technical example may already have contributed to Degas' earliest experiments with wax, a phase called to mind at the 1878 Exposition Universelle, when several of Cuvelier's equestrian waxes were again displayed." The previous year, the animal sculptor Mene had shown at the Salon a rather uncharacteristic statuette of a striding, richly dressed *Toreador* as a highly finished wax, prior to its translation into bronze (fig. 16), while the portraitist Jules Franceschi was to include a wax bust of the composer Charles Gounod in the exhibition of 1879.⁴⁶ Surviving sculptures of this kind, like Franceschi's wax *Portrait of the Painter Edouard-Louis Dubufe* of 1878 (fig. 17), remind us that these were not mere studies or sketches, but highly resolved works that were either preserved for their intrinsic qualities or destined for immediate translation into sophisticated bronzes. Where Mene's figure is almost overburdened by its pedantic detail, Franceschi's honey-colored wax draws much of its vivacity from the nature of the "lightly translucent" substance itself, a characteristic that would necessarily be lost in the casting process.

The widespread use of wax in the 1870s was part of a more general revival of interest in the medium at a number of levels. Pursuing its ancient origins, scholarly books and articles traced the application of wax in early Egyptian "tire perdue" metal casting, in Roman funerary portraiture, and in the tradition of the *ex-voto*



Fig. 17 Jules Franceschi, *Portrait of the Painter Edouard-Louis Dubufe*, 1878, wax, 15 in. (38.1 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Harry Kahn.

figure in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, while drawing attention to renowned wax objects which had survived from former centuries. In 1878, for example, Anatole de Montaiglon delivered a lecture on the "History of Wax Sculpture" at the Union Centrale; the following year, an article by Louis Gonse on the "Musée Wicar, objets de fait: la tête de cire" appeared in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*; and in 1882 the same journal published a sequence of historical essays by Spire Blondel entitled *Wax Modellers*.⁴⁷ In less exalted contexts, wax was also enjoying a revived currency. Though temporary displays of wax figures had been popular for centuries, they finally became institutionalized in France in 1882 with the foundation of the Musée Grévin, a waxwork museum based on Madame Tussaud's in London which was opened by the entrepreneur Alfred Grévin, already encountered in this study in his capacity as a cartoonist (see fig. 9). As Theodore Reff has discovered, Degas' links with several of the personalities depicted in Grévin's first installations are striking, though a description of himself as "a frenzied Grévin" in one of the artist's letters of 1880 appears to concern Degas' draftsmanship as much as his current attempts at sculpture." Reff has also pointed out the prevalence of historic battle panoramas featuring wax figures, an attraction that excited the enthusiasm of Jules Claretie some months after his review of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Visiting one such spectacle, Claretie evoked the vivid illusion created by a combination of wax, plaster, and paint, resulting in a population of "wax mannequins" dressed in soldiers' uniforms. Judging that this mixture of "the morgue and the Musée du Luxembourg, the Salon and Madame Tussaud's" would prove successful with the public, Claretie reflected on the morbid yet essentially paradoxical nature of such representations; of one waxen corpse he wrote that it "provoked the most atrocious sensation of reality itself," adding that "if the wax panorama figures have the air of the dead, they have, conversely, the air of wax figures."

When Eugene Guillaume reviewed the sculpture section of the Salon of 1879, noting that "despite its fragility" wax was producing "more and more interesting results," he was making an altogether more specific point.⁵⁰ In the course of the decade, several ambitious younger sculptors had adopted wax as their primary medium, presenting finished and sometimes life-size figures in the material at this most prestigious of contemporary exhibitions. Where Dubois' image of a standing, naked young woman - entitled *Eve* - was first executed in wax before being translated into plaster and shown in 1873, artists like Henri Cros and Dubois' associate, René de Saint-Marceaux, now displayed waxes that, by virtue of their surface coloration and painterly detail, announced themselves as complete, self-contained works.' Though Cros' more prominent achievements, such as the 1875 polychrome wax head of *Isabeau de Bavière* now in the Musée d'Orsay, were insistently medieval in theme and decorative in manner, he also made smaller, naturalistically tinted portrait reliefs of individuals from his circle." Guillaume noted the use of color by both Saint-Marceaux and Cros, but reserved his most complete commentary for an even more confident work, Jean Desiré Ringel's *Demi-monde*, which he described as "a colored wax statue at natural scale." "Subsequently destroyed, the appearance of Ringel's figure can best be imagined by referring to illustrations of another lost work, the terracotta *Splendeur et misère* of 1881 that incorporated a real hat and spectacles, and such surviving waxes as his lugubriously vivid *Portrait of Maurice Rollinat* of 1892.⁵⁴ The outspokenly naturalistic *Demi-monde* excited consternation and praise in equal measure, remembered as a "charming statue" by Blondel in 1882, but evidently found provocative by the kind of audiences who recoiled from the *Little Dancer Aged*

Fourteen.⁵⁵ Struggling to articulate his discomfort, Guillaume acknowledged that Ringel's sculpture showed great skill and promise for a virtual unknown, but suggested that the application of color was inappropriate to such a lowly form; "adding color to simple reality," he argued, "gives it an indefinable quality of dullness and morbidity," reminding the critic of "galleries of anatomy" or of wax "cast in a mold."⁵⁶

THE FIRST IMPRESSIONIST SCULPTURE

If ever the ground can be said to have been prepared for a sculpture of a young adult in contemporary costume, fashioned in wax and partially tinted, it was surely at this time and in this milieu. Such a subject spanned the gradually evolving imagery of the Salon and the world of the "Intransigents," while the choice of medium reverberated with contemporary scholarship, current studio practice, and the latest novelties of the boulevards and department stores. Critics trembled as they anticipated such objects at future exhibitions; "this is sculpture for the Chinese or for fashion houses," protested Anatole de Montaiglon, predicting that "dressed mannequins from the galleries of clothiers will soon become the last word in art."⁵⁷ For Degas, too, the moment was ripe, both technically and in terms of his advancing claims to seniority ("It is truly regrettable that this distinguished, exceptional, witty and grave artist is not represented in the Musée du Luxembourg," wrote his admirer Philippe Burty as early as 1879).⁵⁸ Sculpture was one of the few avenues that neither he nor his immediate colleagues in the Impressionist circle had explored, at least in public, and the recent successes of Henri Cros (another semi-amateur, whom Degas almost certainly knew), Ringel, and others - with works that were avowedly experimental or topical in theme - may well have spurred Degas on. At the 1880 Impressionist show, he and his current protege, Paul Gauguin, together seized the initiative, Degas announcing his *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in the catalogue but failing to produce it for the display, and Gauguin showing a life-size bust of his twenty-nine-year-old wife, carved in marble but apparently begun as a wax." The following year, when the *Little Dancer* finally appeared, Gauguin again showed his solidarity by submitting two studies of young women in variously colored and painted materials, both in unmistakably modish garb; the medallion of a popular performer, known as the *Singer*, made from wood and plaster touched with color; and the *Little Parisian*, a tinted carving of a woman out walking that has often been compared to Degas' statuette.⁶⁰

As with Gauguin, it seems overwhelmingly probable that Degas made a group of exploratory studies of the human figure as he embarked on this new sculptural project, feeling his way in matters of scale, medium, and surface embellishment. Frustratingly, an unidentified number of Degas' sculptures are known to have been destroyed and those that survive have proved notoriously resistant to dating, while each of the candidates for the *pre-Little Dancer* phase have found themselves challenged for practical or stylistic reasons." On the basis of the artist's notebooks and other supporting documentation, however, four very varied sculptures can be plausibly linked with the years around 1880, reinforcing the notion of a vital, opportunistic engagement with the medium at this time. The latest of these is probably the *Apple Pickers*, a modeled scene of children at the foot of a tree, dated by Reff to the summer of 1881 and further distanced from the *Little Dancer* by its relief format and construction from clay." Interspersed with sketches for this work



Fig. 18 Study for the "Schoolgirl,"
ca. 1880-81, pencil, 6 7/8 x 4 1/4 in.
(16.4 x 10.7 cm), Notebook 34, p. 17,
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

in a contemporary notebook are three pencil drawings for another figure, the *Schoolgirl* (cat. 31, bronze), a small wax statuette of an adolescent in everyday clothing that has much in common with the larger work, including the now-familiar advanced right leg and small-featured visage." One of these drawings (fig. 18) shows the extent of their similarity, in the long plait of hair and angular bodily form, while the *Little Dancer-like* arm pushed abruptly into the small of the back is one of the few recurrences of this motif outside Degas' dance repertoire.

A more contentious precursor of the 1881 figure is *Dancer at Rest, Hands on Her Hips, Left Leg Forward* (cat. 37), which has been variously located between 1878 and 1895 by different authorities." Though it differs in projecting the left leg and maintaining the separation of the hands, this study - as Alison Luchs and others have accepted - is perhaps the most convincing candidate for the missing link between Degas' early equestrian exercises and the extraordinary maturity of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*.⁶⁵ It is instructive to find, for example, that the standing figure has none of the sinuousness or acrobatic complexity of the waxes from later years; that its surface shows extensive working with a toothed modeling implement of a kind used on the 1881 wax; and that it has a distinctive anatomical vagueness around the breast, waist, and hips that would be consistent with an early trial with reduced-scale clothing. More than one acquaintance of the artist reported the presence of several dressed figures, "dancing girls modelled in red wax, some dressed in muslin skirts," as George Moore recalls, raising the possibility that the *Dancer at Rest* might have been among the first to be costumed in this way.

Before falling into the too-common error of assuming that artists make their work in strict, production-line sequences of paintings or sculptures, completing one before moving on to the next, it should be noted that everything we know about Degas' studio practice indicates a quite different pattern. Renowned for his procrastination, Degas would over-paint canvases and retouch pastels months or sometimes years after their inception, gathering around him hundreds of partially completed pictures and "borrowing" figures from images still in progress. Between 1879 and 1881, he was almost certainly surrounded by a variety of sculptures in progressive states of completion, as well as a scattering of drawings and sketchbook studies related to them. Encouraged by the flexibility of the medium, a step forward on one wax model could stimulate modifications to another; new drawings might be made before, during, and - as was certainly the case in later years - after the resolution of a particular figurine; and acquired skills could be applied retrospectively to an earlier effort, in a continuous, mobile process of mutual influence. Whatever its precise history, the fourth sculpture associated with this phase, the *Nude Study for the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (cat. 39), must have played a crucial role in such a process. The tradition of defining the naked body before advancing to its clothed successor was of considerable antiquity, along with the practice of making smaller studies for full-size or monumental works, whether in sculpture or painting. As a younger man, Degas had learned to employ both these approaches, gradually abandoning them as his mastery increased and a more direct response to his subject matter became appropriate, though occasionally reviving them as the occasion demanded in later life.

In this sense, his drawings of a nude Marie van Goethem (cats. 36 and 38) might be seen as a cautious, temporary return to the routines of his youth by an artist approaching an unfamiliar challenge. *Nude Study for the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* has always been understood to fulfill the same preliminary role, allowing Michael

drawing of the naked figure, the *Study of a Nude Dancer* (cat. 38) now in Oslo, which tackles Marie van Goethem's form from a more complex, three-quarter view. Struggling a little with her wayward legs and omitting her left arm, perhaps for greater spatial clarity, the artist proceeded to block out the masses of the girl's torso in broad swathes of charcoal. Already, it seems, the passage of time may be spelled out in the transition from the waiflike thinness of the first studies to the fuller curves and rudimentary breasts of the Oslo study, while the possibility that the freer, more urgent drawing manner may represent a return to the model at a critical point in the execution of the *Nude Study* should perhaps be entertained.

Much ingenuity has been expended on the group of masterful drawings of Marie van Goethem in full dancer's costume; more than one commentator has proposed that they were made after - rather than in preparation for - the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, as a self-imposed exercise of the kind indicated in the artist's notebook, as a draftsmanly tour de force, or simply as gifts for friends and admirers. Others have suggested that more than one model was involved, while a recent study has detected a visible transformation of Marie's features, from relative neutrality to atavistic decline, as the sequence advanced.' If some of these interpretations lay a greater burden on the drawings than they can bear and overlook the visual license an artist might naturally be allowed, all of them recognize the exceptional nature of the pictorial project. More than in any other of his works of art, Degas has attempted to comprehend, even to achieve complete mastery over, a single three-dimensional form in all its palpability and space-occupying complexity, using only the conventional means of line and tone on a succession of sheets of paper. Slowly circling around his stationary model, not just once but several times, Degas became the moon to his subject's earth, moving through the surrounding space and implicitly and provocatively through time.

Stopping to record no less than seventeen angles of view or details, some only a few degrees removed from their neighbors, the artist embraced the entire standing figure and isolated recalcitrant features. *Two Studies of a Dancer* (fig. 29) reveals how minutely the subject was scrutinized and highlights some of the problems encountered. Beginning with the left-hand dancer, Degas sketched in the head, hair, and tutu rather broadly, then concentrated his attention on the girl's strangely tensed, caliper-like arms and crossed feet. Shifting very slightly to the right, he then repeated the body even more peremptorily, but returned to the legs with his charcoal, pastels, and - more unexpectedly - his watercolors to tackle their now separated, steeply angled juxtaposition." This disposition of arms and legs continued to exert him, as we can see from two further attempts at the form in *Four Studies of a Dancer* (cat. 43) and *Three Studies of a Dancer* (cat. 41), and an entire sheet devoted to the latter, *Studies for Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (cat. 42). Though he eventually mastered them, the forms of the ballet dancer's limbs have a complex spatial as well as linear life, presenting the artist with unfamiliar demands that evidently strained at his previous accomplishments.

In the same way that Degas omitted the left-hand arm in *Study of a Nude Dancer* (cat. 38) in order to articulate the figure, so he allowed himself considerable license in his efforts to define the costumed model. In *Four Studies of a Dancer* (cat. 43) each view of the subject focuses on a challenging element, such as the face, the profile, or the still-elusive arms, while ruthlessly excluding the remainder of the body." The recently rediscovered *Three Studies of a Dancer* (cat. 41) shows the artist disregarding details like the buttons and lace trimming on the girl's bodice and, even more drastically, lifting the long hair of the left-hand figure into a bun

Pantazzi to claim, "There has never been any doubt that the nude version ... is the model for the dressed version ... and that, as such, it preceded it." Following Daphne Barbour's 1995 publication of her technical examination of the sculpture, however, even this secure point of reference has lost its hold. X-ray and pigment analysis and close scrutiny of the surface of the *Nude Study* have established that the present wax (from which all the known bronzes ultimately derive) was partially cast from an earlier version at Degas' direction and may therefore post-date the *Little Dancer* itself.⁶⁵ Important though this undoubtedly is in shedding light on the artist's ingenuity and longer-term ambitions, it does not distract from the overwhelming probability that an original wax form of the *Nude Study* existed in the late 1870s and that it was intimately involved in the sculptural evolution of that moment. Barbour also puts forward an intriguing case for seeing the generalized surfaces of the known nude study as a reflection of Degas' later manner, requiring us to imagine a detailed, descriptive finish to the lost early version that would have been more consistent with the wax *Little Dancer*.

With the exception of the *Apple Pickers*, all Degas' early studies were made principally of wax, built around supporting structures of wire and metal, and attached to a haphazard variety of wooden and other bases. The latter vary from rough planks to blocks of plaster, though the heavy wooden platform chosen for the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* is exceptional in its sophistication, even suggesting a section of a real dance rehearsal floor to one modern author." If the *Schoolgirl* is modeled on a commercially manufactured armature (a rarity in Degas' oeuvre), everything else about this group of waxes suggests enthusiastic improvisation, as the artist toyed with different scales, a palette of somber pigments and, above all, a range of finishes. In its softened state, wax can be manipulated with the hands into the desired form, then further added to or modified until the desired texture and degree of refinement have been achieved. Parts of the *Nude Study* have been left relatively coarse, while the much smaller *Schoolgirl* comes equipped with fully detailed belt, hat, shoes, and satchel, all coaxed into the surface of the wax with a fine point or blade. In Degas' later years, the marks of his fingers are often vividly apparent in his rough and expressive waxes, but in these trial studies, a more impersonal, if still uneven, treatment has been preferred. Various tools were used, including the kind of toothed scraping implement much employed by sculptors and modelers, here leaving a hatchwork of parallel abrasions in areas of the *Nude Study* and the *Little Dancer*. At least one critic was confused by this apparent carelessness, arguing that the irregularities "inscribed on the flesh" of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* reduced the illusionistic effect that he assumed to be Degas' ambition.⁷⁰ In practice, Degas seems to have consciously opted for a number of contrasting finishes in the 1881 wax, from the delicately smoothed face and neck to the more insistently textured, expressive arms; even at this level, it appears, the artist wished to signal the paradoxical nature of his medium and the ambiguity of his sculptural aspirations.

At the center of these experiments, and perhaps of others now lost or destroyed, was inevitably the process of constructing the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* itself (frontispiece). Circumstantial evidence suggests that it was begun some time after February 1878, when Marie van Goethem celebrated her fourteenth birthday, but almost nothing else is known of the preparations Degas made, the advice he took, or the practical assistance he sought out.⁷¹ Having only experienced wax modeling on a small scale, in perhaps half a dozen earlier studies of horses, Degas might have been expected to turn to his sculptor friends for guidance at such a critical time. Detailed examination of the *Little Dancer*



Fig. 19 *Two Studies of a Dancer, ca.*
1878-80, chalk and pastel, 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 23 in.
(47.2 x 58.5 cm), Lord Rayne, London.

in order to explore her shoulders and collar bone. Similar liberties are taken in *Three Studies of a Dancer in Fourth Position* (cat. 40), where bodices are variously complete and hair bunched or lowered according to the artist's localized interest. In all three of these sheets, stray lines on the surrounding paper and abandoned or partly erased contours persuade us that these are working drawings, made in the first instance to assist the process of observation rather than as marketable works of art. By contrast with the elegant *Two Dancers* (cat. 3s) and the boldly asymmetrical *Dancer Resting* (fig. 23), the figures in the working sheets are arranged schematically, their strokes of pastel on tutus, hair, and stockings included as much for visual coherence as documentary accuracy. The fact that two of the drawings were acquired by contemporary admirers of Degas, the collector Jacques Doucet and the critic Roger Marx (who illustrated the study he owned in an article of 1897), can be seen to reflect a growing taste for the artist's more uninhibited draftsmanship, though it remains conceivable that he added further touches of color before selling or presenting them to his acquaintances.⁷⁹

undertaken by Arthur Beale, however, has revealed just the kind of unorthodox use of materials and doubtful command of technique that we might associate with an amateur." As if acknowledging his limitations, Degas relied in the first instance on his skills as a draftsman, testing out a series of poses for the model and exploring several possibilities before making his choice. On each of a pair of very similar sheets - so alike that they must have been executed side by side - the artist drew the nude model three times, her right foot extended and only the position of her arms varying from sheet to sheet. One of these compositions, known only in an old photograph, shows the young dancer with both arms across her chest and her right hand reaching toward her left shoulder, a gesture repeated in a lively, almost caricatural sketchbook drawing of a clothed dancer seen from behind (cat. 34a), also made about this time." The sketchbook is of considerable significance in the evolution of the *Little Dancer*, containing studies for another of Degas' sculptures, the *Apple Pickers*, various dance motifs, and several pages of often-quoted notes for future projects. In one such list, the artist proposed "drawing a profile which wouldn't move, moving myself, going up or down, the same for a whole figure ... draw a series of arm movements of the dance, or of legs which wouldn't move, turning around them oneself"⁷⁴ Especially valuable in an artist who rarely committed his mental processes to paper, this combined record of visual strategies and works in progress gives us a rare insight into Degas' creative activity in the years around 1880.

The same source provides a specific key to some of the studies under review, such as the handsome charcoal and pastel *Two Dancers* (cat. 35), a virtual reworking of the notebook drawing from two contrasted points of view. Here we can vividly imagine the artist "turning around" the standing figure as he drew the two poses, "going up or down" to select his vantage point, and opting for a position well above the dancer's shoulders and widely splayed feet. The sheet is noticeably artful in its composition, an examination of its surface revealing that the nearer of the two figures was added over the beginnings of a scenery background, as if the artist has hesitated between picture making and sculptural research. Had he extended the use of color (it was begun on green paper and touched with white highlights), such a study might have been developed into a backstage scene like that of *Dancer Resting* (fig. 23), another superb pastel with the closest possible links to the making of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Beneath the refined detail of the newspaper-reading ballerina (the same height as the figure in *Two Dancers* and several other studies for the sculpture), a similarly vigorous depiction in charcoal of an adolescent body can be discerned, again seen from a conspicuously high angle against a sharply tilted floor. In both cases, it seems, Degas decided to pursue the image's pictorial potential, recoiling from the sculptural complexities of the pose and settling for a less ambitious, more symmetrical stance in his final choice for the wax sculpture.

By returning to the second of the two initial sheets, *Three Studies of a Nude Dancer* (cat. 36), Degas effectively determined the future course of his project." With strokes of charcoal on gray paper, the long-limbed ease and supercilious erectness of the *Little Dancer* has been anticipated in almost every particular, the entire figure documented from front, back, and side as if it were a scientific specimen. A sign that Degas may have moved directly into sculpture at this early stage, perhaps beginning work on the preliminary version of the *Nude Study for the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, is incorporated on the same sheet in a scribbled diagram at top right that resembles a primitive wire armature. Further evidence of his three-dimensional thinking may be implicit in the only other known

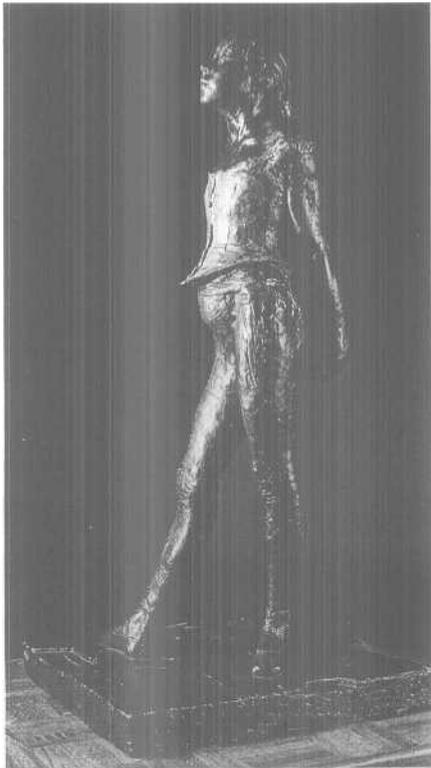


Fig. 20 *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (without skirt), ca. 1920-21, plaster, 39 in. (99 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.

It is often forgotten that when he moved from his drawings to the making of the wax *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, Degas progressed from studies of a clothed model to the construction of an effectively nude figure. More accurately, knowing that the dancer's tutu, bodice, and wig could only be attached to the sculpture at a later stage, most of Degas' time was spent in the presence of a curious hybrid, neither clothed nor truly naked, anatomically incomplete and probably bald. Even today, the figure is disconcerting when seen without its skirt (fig. 20), revealing areas of approximate modeling around the thighs and waist that must formerly have extended to the dancer's torso, feet, and head. Requiring even more of the artist's imagination, the need to envisage the sculpture's final costumed form at every turn must have considerably heightened his need for a comprehensive set of drawings. Given the complexity of the project, it is also highly probable that Marie van Goethem continued to pose on occasion for the wax statuette itself, though once again the drawings would have provided the best possible substitute when the young apprentice was engaged in her relentless routines at the Opera. Even the finest sheets of studies would hardly provide sufficient detail in areas such as her head and face, for example, or for the interlaced fingers that are barely indicated in the surviving studies. Most importantly, the ballerina, in her billowing tutu and decorative accessories, would have reminded Degas of the visual ensemble he had initially envisaged, and its distinctive balance of lightness and insubstantiality with hard contours, dense color, and emphatic mass.

More misunderstandings continue to exist about the costume and accessories of the *Little Dancer* than about any other aspect of the sculpture. As recently as 1988 it was asserted - in an otherwise exemplary summary of the figure's history - that the wax was first shown "dressed in a real bodice, tutu, stockings and ballet shoes: on her head was a wig with a pigtail tied with a leek-green ribbon, and she wore a similar ribbon around her neck. The wax body was tinted to simulate flesh."⁸⁰ Almost all these statements are partially accurate or misleading, a situation exacerbated by the ahistorical presentation of many of the bronze casts of the *Little Dancer* in the world's major museums. In the first place, of course, the wax statuette is a study on a *reduced scale*, at ninety-nine centimeters high some two-thirds the size of an average fourteen-year-old. For this reason, few of the items of costume could have been "real," but were miniaturized versions made especially for, this somewhat doll-like creation: it is surely significant, as Theodore Reff has pointed out, that a Degas notebook records a visit to a supplier of hair for dolls or puppets at this time.⁸¹ While it is conceivable that the bodice and skirt were those intended for a younger child, the probability remains that they, like the wig (which has a loosely bunched plait rather than a "pigtail") were devised especially for Degas' sculpture. Now covered with a layer of colored wax, the dancing shoes seem likewise to be contrived, evidently made of a canvaslike material (not the "pink satin" noted by one critic) yet insufficiently substantial to be in any sense "real." More serious still is the confusion over the *Little Dancer's* stockings or tights. Though one of the dozen or so accounts of the figure's first appearance refers to its legs in "silk tights with slight creases," this was almost certainly a misreading of the work: a more careful examination of the sculpture shows that creases, folds, and even the indentations in the legs caused by the shoe-ribbons have been modeled in wax by the artist, details that would hardly have been included if they were soon to be obliterated by a pair of tights."

In the early criticism of the *Little Dancer*, ribbons of various kinds were described on the 1881 figurine, though it is again unlikely that all the reports arc

resembling human skin, an option that was open to Degas and widely exploited in the wax sculptures of the day, the body of the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* looked for all the world like an antique statue.

In perhaps the last ironical twist to this most convoluted of sculptures, toward the end of its construction Degas dressed his partly naked wax structure in a simple fabric tutu, as close to its "real" counterpart as any element of the work. Outrageously travestied in the various limp and stained, or coquettish and bristlingly short skirts seen on bronze casts throughout the world today, this tutu would unquestionably have been almost knee-length and full, as shown in every one of the preparatory drawings for the sculpture and in the countless pastels and paintings of dancers in Degas' repertoire. Inexplicably, when the newly minted bronzes were first "dressed" in the early 1920s, they were equipped with minuscule skirts that barely covered their hips, an anachronistic pattern that has persisted into our own times and profoundly distorted the perception of Degas' sculpture.⁹² Witnesses of the original *Little Dancer* leave no doubt that the outfit on the wax figure was entirely conventional, even if their mastery of fabric terminology was somewhat uncertain; Mantz, for example, described the costume as a "dress of gauze," Huysmans spoke of its "muslin skirts," and Our Lady Correspondent noted the "real tulle petticoats" worn by the young ballerina.⁹³

Degas' contemporaries were also unanimous in their accounts of ballet dancers' dresses, evoking their voluminous, enveloping clouds of fine material that sometimes reached the ankles but never rose significantly above the knee. Writing of Degas' pictures in 1876, Stephane Mallarme had described how the "muslin drapery forms a luminous, ever-moving atmosphere" around the bodies of the ballerinas, while Ludovic Halevy recorded the way dancers would "puff out their gauze skirts" prior to going on stage.⁹⁴ Several sources indicate that a typical beginner would be allocated "five metres of muslin" with which to make her first tutu, enough to account for the substantial bulk and length of Marie van Goethem's dress in images like *Three Studies of a Dancer in Fourth Position* (cat. 40) and *Three Studies of a Dancer* (cat. 41).⁹⁵ In both these drawings, the skirt clearly billows upward and outward around the hips, "lifting" the figure in such a way that, when applied to the sculpture, would necessarily have transformed its apparent mass and radically altered its initial impact on viewers of the day. Significantly, too, the length of this original dress concealed much of the dancer's lower body, drastically reducing the prominence of the legs and obviating the need for the artist to model the wax in detail above the knees.⁹⁶ Even the childish tutus worn by novices at practice, such as those visible in Renouard's lithographs (figs. 6 and 7) are substantial by the standards of most of today's dressed bronzes, and we must look forward to the time when museums and collectors follow the brave lead of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and, most immediate to the present project, the Joslyn Art Museum, in returning the *Little Dancer* to its historic propriety.⁹⁷

In the spring of 1880, Degas had sufficient confidence in the progress of his dressed wax dancer to announce its imminent appearance at the forthcoming exhibition of Impressionist art, the fifth in the group's history. Listed in the printed catalogue, the sculpture was still not in place, however, when the installation was opened on 1 April. Five days later, the critic Gustave Goetschy revealed that the work had yet to appear, but told his readers he had heard "marvellous things" of the promised "ballerina aged fourteen modelled from life, dressed in a genuine 'bouffant' skirt and wearing real dancing shoes."⁹⁸ Other critics mentioned it briefly, losing interest when the work failed to materialize by

the exhibition's closing date, 30 April. Though the cause of the delay is not known, we might reasonably surmise that the exceptional practical challenges the artist had set himself, and so formidably surmounted through most of the sculpture's gestation, were to blame, along with his notorious fastidiousness in matters of display. Stories that were circulated subsequently, telling of the need for last-minute reinforcement to the wax and of Degas' drastic remodeling of the mouth, turn out to be without apparent foundation, though such technical factors as the integration of the wig and the wax coating of the bodice and shoes seem once again to have delayed the figure's unveiling at the following year's exhibition." Apparently for reasons of presentation as much as a need for security, Degas had ordered a glass cabinet and now installed it in the galleries chosen for the 1881 show, where critics had fun at his expense by admiring the "luxurious simplicity" of the empty vitrine.¹⁰¹ On 8 April 1881 Auguste Daigny could still observe that the "wax statuette" was missing, but a week later Louis Enault became the first critic to respond to the newly installed work. In two brisk phrases, Enault announced to the world that the "*Petite Dausseuse* by M. Degas, a half-life-size wax statuette, is simply frightful. Never has the misfortune of adolescence been more sadly represented."¹⁰¹ Soon other critics followed, but within three weeks the exhibition had closed, after one of the briefest and - at least initially - most inglorious public appearances by any of Degas' works of art.