

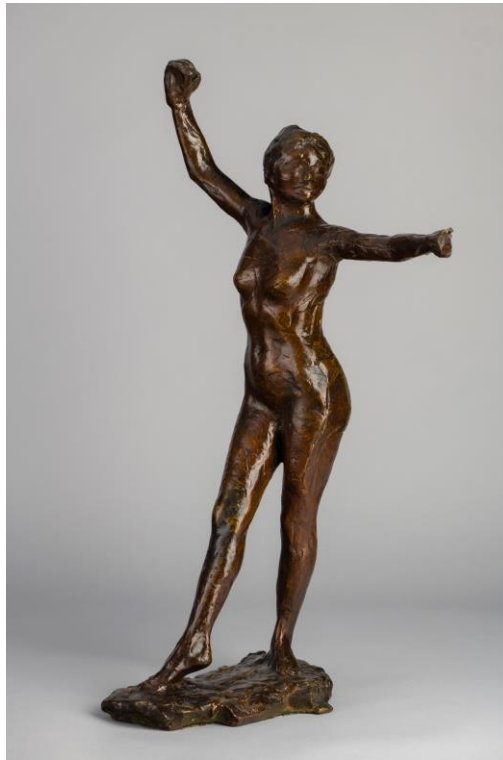
## Student Lightning Talk: *Degas' Dancers*



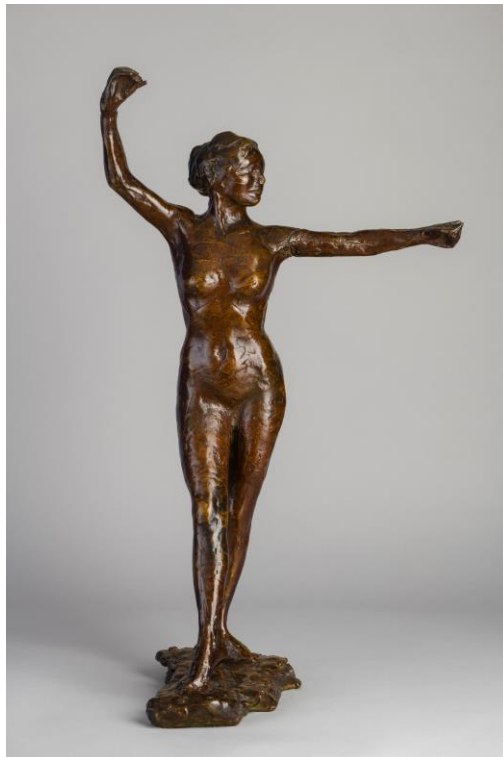
*Grande Arabesque, Third Time*, Edgar Degas, model: about 1885-90,  
cast: 1919-21, bronze, 44.5 X 55.3 x 29 cm.  
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



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*Dancer Ready to Dance, The Right Foot Forward*, Edgar Degas, model: about 1885-90, cast: 1919-21, bronze, 56.5 x 25.5 x 20.5 cm.  
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## Transcript

Hello, I'm Emily Langridge and I'm a third year history of art student at the University of Birmingham. Thank you for joining me for this podcast, in which I will discuss two sculptures by Edgar Degas in the Barber's collection called *Grande Arabesque*, *Third Time* and *Dancer Ready to Dance*, *Right Foot Forward*.

It's natural to look at objects in a gallery as if they're all finished and complete works of art. If something is being displayed, surely it was always meant to be seen? However, this might not always be the case.

Both *Grande Arabesque* and *Dancer Ready to Dance* were modelled by Degas in wax at some point between 1885 and 1890. However, the models weren't cast in bronze, in small editions, until 1921, a few years after they were found in Degas's studio at his death. The models were never intended for exhibition, and I'd like to use this talk to think about why they were cast in bronze. Was it purely a money-making scheme to capitalise on Degas's reputation as an artistic genius? If the models were never intended to be seen publicly, do we have the right to look at their bronze casts in the gallery environment now?

I'll start by introducing Degas and Impressionism, then I'll consider the reasons why I think we should – or shouldn't – display these objects, and I'll end by sharing my own opinions on this.

Degas was born in Paris in 1834 to a wealthy family. His father ran the family banking business. He supported Degas when he dropped out of law school to become an artist. Although this talk focuses on two bronze casts, Degas was best known as a painter- he only exhibited one sculpture, called *Little Dancer aged Fourteen*, in his lifetime. Degas first made an impact on the art world through traditional grand history paintings that showed scenes from history or mythology. After he gained fame in the 1860s, he turned to scenes of modern life, including his celebrated images of ballerinas. As he got older, Degas found it harder to sell his works, and he lost his studio in 1912 due to financial difficulty. He

had to leave his home at the same time as it was going to be demolished, and this combination meant that he stopped working. He died a few years later in 1917.

Free from the constraints of needing to make money, Degas could be remarkably innovative. He was one of the first artists to relate painting to the new and developing medium of photography, which inspired him to produce unusual compositions in which the canvas was divided in untraditional ways. A good example of this is the Barber's *Jockeys before the Race*, painted in 1879. Degas represented movement in a highly original manner, giving the impression of capturing a moment in time – like a photographic snapshot. He also used wax models to help inform the poses of the figures in his paintings, and their interrelationship, and this was the original function of the two compositions considered in this talk.

*Grande Arabesque, Third Time* and *Dancer Ready to Dance, Right Foot Forward* are on display in the Barber's Blue Gallery which has a fine group of Impressionist works. Degas is regarded as an Impressionist artist. The Impressionists depicted contemporary, realistic scenes visible in the real world. They sought to capture an impression of a scene, its atmosphere or a moment in time. Impressionist paintings often look like they have been made quickly with their broken brushwork. These qualities made the work of the Impressionists appear very different to the traditional works of art promoted by the established Academies.

The subject of *Grande Arabesque, Third Time* is a young ballerina who is leaning forward. She has her left leg lifted high into the air, and all her weight is on her right leg. Her arms are outstretched on either side, and her head is just lifted enough to show her face. The ballerina of *Dancer Ready to Dance, Right Foot Forward* is in a very different pose. She stands upright, with her right arm curved gracefully beside her head and her left arm held out at shoulder level. As the title suggests, her right foot is placed forward in front of her body.

At first glance in a gallery, these sculptures might be seen as deliberately 'Impressionist' in style. Like Impressionist paintings, they have rough, textured surfaces and we can see where Degas modelled the wax and

how it was moved in certain directions. The figure of *Grande Arabesque* has a cut in the left leg, which shows where Degas inserted an armature (such as a piece of metal wire or even a matchstick) to support the weight of the limb in the original wax model. Both of the figures lack detail. They don't have defined facial features and their hands have no fingers. This is because the original models were made to help Degas explore the play of light and shadows on different poses rather than to record an individual's character or details. This also explains the nudity of these figures, and indeed of all of Degas's posthumously cast bronzes - whereas the figure of his only exhibited sculpture, *Little Dancer*, wears a satin corset and gauze skirt.

The full title of *Grande Arabesque, Third Time* is quite specific, so we might question what 'third time' means. It is one of a series of sculptures showing a ballerina in the process of the 'grande arabesque' movement, with her torso getting progressively lower and her leg higher in each. The dancer shifts from standing upright in the first sculpture to being almost horizontal in this work. Together they show a sequence of a figure in continual motion. We only have this one work from the *Grande Arabesque* series in the Barber, which raises the question: if Degas had chosen to exhibit it, would he have wanted to display it alone or with the rest of the series?

Seventy-four of the 150 models found in Degas's studio were cast in bronze after he died, each in small editions of twenty-two casts. This raises some interesting ethical questions. Should a work be displayed if the artist never had any intention of exhibiting it? Degas's Montmartre studio, where the models were found, was described as a dark and crowded place – so a complete contrast to the bronzes' current location in the Barber. Here, they are on display in an open space lit by electric lights that allow us to see even the smallest details in the figures. It is true that the original context for most works of art on display in galleries today probably wasn't a gallery. For example, panels from altarpieces were meant to be seen in a religious setting rather than in a gallery. But this doesn't mean that the original context is irrelevant. In fact, it can really help us to understand a work of art. Now these sculptures can be used as educational tools that give us an insight into Degas's artistic process that we would not have otherwise.

These sculptures were cast in agreement with the Degas family and we have to question why they might have agreed to having these casts made after his death. It could have been to disseminate Degas's ideas more widely. But it could also have been a way to quickly make money from his reputation as an artistic genius. Once Degas had died, the sale of his art was the only way that the family could make any money from it and my research suggests that this money would have been needed. Authorising these casts would also have kept people talking about Degas and potentially changed public opinion of his art.

Degas could not have imagined how many people now look at the various casts of the *Grande Arabesque* and *Dancer Ready to Dance*, often in a public gallery space like the Barber. But is it right for us to be looking at these bronzes? Personally, I think that we should display them within a gallery context to be looked at, studied, and enjoyed. By displaying them, we can better understand Degas's artistic process rather than seeing them simply as individual sculptures intended for exhibition. They are beautiful sculptures with their own complex histories that we can learn from, and it would have been a shame if the waxes in the studio had been left to disintegrate, never to be seen.

What do you think about how we view these sculptures? Do you think Degas would approve of displaying them in a gallery?

Thank you for listening!