by Joan Altabe

Posthumous Bronze Casting

Art scholars and museum officials have been bumping heads over Degas bronzes traveling the museum circuit. Scholars say the bronzes are not by Degas, but merely reproductions cast after he died. Given the crowds that these exhibits draw, you can imagine what the museums say.

The disagreement became public in 2000 during the Smith College exhibit's stop at the Cummer Museum of Art in Jacksonville, Florida. *Times-Union* arts writer Charlie Patton reported the objections of Fernandina Beach printmaker Gary Arseneau, who called the bronze works fakes, saying, "Dead people don't make art." He also faulted the artist's signatures on the posthumous castings.

Arseneau told me that having seen "a lot" of illegitimate prints in his field makes him sensitive to false claims by galleries and museums. He said he believes the bronzes are museum-shop fare, and not worthy of a museum exhibit. "You're collecting revenue on a scam," he said, referring to the museum's admission fees.

A College Art Association article in 1995 by Roger J. Crum, called *Degas Bronzes?,* supports Arseneau's

contentions about the Degas bronzes. According to Crum, the bronzes aren't even direct reproductions of the original. He said they are two generations after the wax original. Plaster molds of the originals were used for the bronzes, which would make them reproductions of reproductions.

The castings began after Degas died, when his dealer, Durand-Ruel, found 150 pieces of wax figures in the artist's studio and made a deal with Degas' brother and sister to cast 74 of them in bronze in an edition of 22.

This shouldn't have happened, said Crum, who based his conclusion on a conversation that critic François Thiebault-Sisson recalled having with Degas. The artist told the critic that he modeled the waxworks merely as exercises for his paintings: "Since no one will ever see these efforts, no one should think of speaking about them," Degas is quoted as saying. "After my death, all that will fall apart by itself."

Literature from the National Gallery of Art, holder of the largest public collection of Degas' original wax sculptures, notes that Degas didn't even like bronzes: "The medium was too permanent and ill-suited to the way he worked, which involved constant changing and revision."

Smith College's exhibit catalog rightly characterizes Degas' waxworks as "preparatory notions, nothing more. None of this was intended for sale."

When Florida's Ringling Museum showed Smith's collection in 2001, the wall labels for the Degas bronzes made clear that they were cast posthumously. But it gave no indication that the casting lacked specific permission from the artist, nor that they were reproductions of reproductions.

Robert W. Torchia, an art professor at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville who also questions the authenticity of the Degas bronzes, said, "Museums should just come out and say what's true. Then it'd be a non-story. Evasive posturing is unnecessary."

Torchia said he lost a job as curator at the Cummer Museum when an exhibit of Rodin bronzes went on display there. Torchia said that the Rodins had been cast after the artist died, like the Degas bronzes had been. Torchia said that he had wanted to call them reproductions rather than originals.

Cummer director Maarten Van de Guchte said that it was museum policy not to comment on personnel matters.

Aaron DeGroft, a Ringling Museum curator at the time of the Degas show, was hired at the Cummer when Torchia was fired, and defended the abbreviated wall label by citing an entry about Degas' bronzes in the *Dictionary of Art*, a 34-volume history published by Grove Press. "Although these works were largely private and intended almost as sketches, some were quite elaborate. He had thought of having his wax pieces cast in bronze, but in fact, casts were only made in 1919, after his death."

Interestingly, DeGroft had faulted this same dictionary for factual errors when it was published in 1996, saying then

"None of this was intended for sale."

that the reference books confused the Cà d'Zan, John Ringling's house, with the museum he founded. Another entry about the Ringling Rubens – the basis for the museum's Rubens tapestries – also was incorrect, he said. The dictionary showed the tapestries created for a Carmelite convent rather than in a Franciscan convent.

Posthumous bronzing has been such a sticking point in the art world that in 1974 the College Art Association put out a code governing the issue called *Ethics and Guidelines*. Endorsed by the Association of Museum Directors, it says that "all transfers into new materials, unless specifically condoned by the artists ... should be considered as inauthentic or counterfeit. Unauthorized casts of works in the public domain cannot be looked upon as accurate presentations of the artist's achievement."

In a 1996 edition of *Art News* magazine, Robert Kashey, a member of the committee that wrote the College Art Association *Ethics and Guidelines*, said the situation has not improved: "Institutions have gone along with posthumous casting ... exhibiting them and having people try to appreciate them as original casts.... So we really have a problem because this is all condoned – in fact, sometimes it's celebrated. It has not been good for sculpture."

Also in the *Art News* article, Kirk Varnedoe, then Director of the Painting and Sculpture Department at New York's Museum of Modern Art, called the issue of posthumous bronzes "the messiest subject alive. If you decide once the heart beats for the last time, that's it – nothing ever produced after that is authentic – it makes your life much simpler."

You'd think.

But two years ago, the Milwaukee Art Museum mounted a show of 70 Degas bronzes that have also been called fakes. And as though to give greater importance to the work, Degas' *Little Dancer Aged 13* was set on a pedestal in a room by itself. This, for sculpture called third-generation reproductions.

Museums continue to show these works. Milwaukee museum curator Laurie Winters has defended the practice, saying that both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have ignored the naysayers. "And that's what the Milwaukee Art Museum has done, and so have all of the other venues that hosted this exhibition.…Museums pay millions of dollars to have these works, and they wouldn't be doing that if they were fakes or reproductions."

Follow the money, says naysayer Arseneau. "The museum wants to cash in, and everyone involved wants to cash in. So they have to be deceptive. They have to call them sculpture because if they called them reproductions people probably wouldn't show up."

The rhubarb goes on without end, whirring and lagging, tantamount to shadow slashing. ✍

Museums continue to show these works.

FAR® and the Fine Art Registry Logo are registered trademarks of Global Fine Art Registry, LLC. Fine Art Registry™ and Helping Bring Order to the World of Art™ are trademarks of Global Fine Art Registry, LLC. ©2007 Global Fine Art Registry, LLC. All Rights Reserved.