

Degas' Woman in a Bathtub, Le Tub



Woman in a Bathtub aka Le Tub 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Bronze sculpture

1889 modeled & cast 1920-1921 (cast 3 years after Degas' death)

Edward Degas 1834-1917

89.99 on view G351

Elements for Tour: Woman in Art; Creativity of an Artist; Sculpture; Impressionism; Influence on Post Impressionism, Modern & Contemporary Art

Questions:

1. What's going on with this sculpture & what's she doing? What do you feel observing her in her bath?
2. How does this differ from classical & contemporary sculpture (1880's)? Compare finish, pose, media to Frederick MacMonnies 'Diana with a Bow' 64.62 @ G353 1890 sculpture of goddess from classical Greek Mythology

Degas' Woman in a Bathtub, Le Tub

3. (after stating multimedia nature of model) In what ways is this a predecessor of current modes of sculpture & contemporary art? Eg. Collage, found objects, cf. Picasso's Babbon, Hierst's Cabinet of St. John.

Theme & Sculpture: Theme of presentation of this work might well be how many levels of innovation Degas was working when he created his model of Le Tub. They are the multi-media nature of the model for the casting (w/emphasis on the casting done after his death); the intellectual puzzle Degas may have set himself & its resolution; finally the nature of the pose & the object-being a deeply human, here & now look at one of life's simple but rewarding joys-a quiet intimate moment in a bath.

The Pose: On a square base & lying on her back in a circular tub a nude young woman is enjoying her bath. While crowded in her space in her tub she appears to be enjoying herself. She extends her right arm & hand to touch the toes of her left foot resting on her right knee. Where the back of her head touches the tub her hair falls over the tub edge. Her left hand also hangs over the tub edge--stretched out to her left. We catch her in her moment; her restful posture, relaxed, also relaxes us. We can see her whole only from above; we can walk about the sculpture and see different aspects, different looks as she pauses washing up this day, this second.

And what does Degas say about this instant, this moment he fractured for her & for himself & now for us: 'No art is less spontaneous than mine.' . 'What I do is the result of reflection and the study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity & temperament, I know nothing.' He has worked all this out: the composition, the media & material used for the sculpture, all this is planned, a feigned spontaneity; but for us it is spontaneous, a captured moment.

What we see @ MIA is all bronze, cast three years after his death. But 1889 make the model used after his death for a bronze, Degas was doing something else in 1889 for himself. The model for the casting is what he made; it is in the National Gallery of Art Washington DC. & from the model we can infer what he was doing: the pedestal is wood; the tub is metal with a ring of lead; the nude figure is red tinted beeswax; the water is white plaster; at 3 of the four corners of the pedestal Degas clumped cloth soaked in plaster; the beeswax left hand extended over the tub edge holds a real sponge. This is a phenomenal, experimental creative burst—and that's all Degas wanted to do with this. He was working to expand his own scope of sculptural materials—for a nude in her moment of relaxed self enjoyment.

He never had his model cast in his lifetime & his heirs arranged the casting when his many sculptures were discovered after his death.

Her pose is relaxed in the bath. When you look closely at Le Tub you will notice the rough finish is a constant in the sculpture other than the water rippling around her body. As importantly this is not a study for a monumental statue; it is a small structure for Degas' own enjoyment. It is not a classical nude like MacMonnies' Diana floating above us on a steeple like a nude quasi-

Degas' Woman in a Bathtub, Le Tub

Mary-Poppins w/o an umbrella, Diana is a goddess smooth & shiny & monumental. Degas' work is a very human sculpture where we relax as the modeled nude is relaxing in a moment in her life; this is an innovative break from classical sculpture-at a human scale for the artist's own effort-to see & to realize a moment for himself, to expand sculpture beyond the classical for his enjoyment and now for ours.

Degas' Resolving an Intellectual Puzzle: (This is more my response to the sculpture than anything you can read elsewhere.) I like to think that Degas set out to integrate recalcitrant standard elements of classical art: to square the circle: combine structure (similar to Cezanne) with human life, the nude with the latter preeminent. Looking straight down on the sculpture, you see that he did integrate the square, the circle & the nude-the wooden pedestal is square, the tub itself is a circle; & overflowing the solid lines of each is the nude. He has combined all the classical elements of art: right angles, the circle and its chords, and the human nude.

I like to think that was the puzzle he gave himself, that was his effort & that was his success. Once Degas did that he didn't need to cast this model in bronze; he had closed the circle, expanded the materials for his sculpture. Then he moved on to whatever he was concerned about next: the horse race that coming weekend; the opening of a ballet sometime soon in the life of Paris & in his.

Observation & Presentation of Nudes: Any review of any work by Degas does recognize his realism in presenting ballerinas at practice and nudes bathing, standing, turning, all this to present movement in his painting, drawings and his sculpture. He was influenced by the advent and development of photography-which he followed and used in his work. He also adopted the cropping and off center, asymmetrical placement of content in a painting from Japanese prints. He was a major collector of such prints. And when he turned to sculpture of nudes, & in his sketches and painting he emphasized movement in that work.

Again what did he say about his work: 'In art, nothing should look like chance, not even movement.' So he planned & carefully composed what he did present. How successful was he in doing this? 'Renoir considered them (Degas' sculptures of dancers & horses) superior to Rodin's sculpture in their sense of movement-always Degas' first concern' Strickland, Annotated Mona Lisa, 2d ed. Page 107 This seems a high compliment from a contemporary who would know movement in his own art.

Degas did make a high effort to present dancers, nudes bathing, all w/o self consciousness and realistically. Keep in mind that in any of his work, and particularly the nude in the tub Degas skillfully carefully planned out the composition and structure of the work. Degas has another telling quote about his work: 'It is all very well to copy what one sees, but it is far better to draw what one now only sees in one's memory. That is a transformation in which imagination collaborates with memory.' Again this emphasizes how carefully he planned his work & how removed from being spontaneous his lively, seemingly spontaneous sculpture is.

Degas' Woman in a Bathtub, Le Tub

The Artist: Edgar Degas born July 19, 1834, died September 27, 1917. Throughout his life he & his art were treated with great praise and honor and from time to time contempt. He is considered one of the founders of Impressionism and recognized as a great influence & supporter of Mary Cassatt; his greatest admirer was Henri de Toulouse Lautrec.

His work in paintings, pastels, sculpture broke new ground; he was involved deeply with other major figures of Impressionism, he worked boldly with color and experimented with materials & with that color, his work w/cropping & asymmetry of Japanese prints incorporated into his work, all make him one of the original greats of Impressionism.

Being a genius and a major figure in art is a bit different from being a whole human being. Degas didn't quite get there. He was relentlessly conservative opposing all social reforms and as he aged he became anti-Semitic.

Renoir, a friend for many years, became chilled by Degas' coldness in later years. Renoir said 'What a creature he was, that Degas! All his friends had to leave him; I was one of the last to go, but even I couldn't stay till the end.'

Degas never married and spent the last years of his life, nearly blind, restlessly wandering the streets of Paris before dying in September 1917. Such was the close to a creative life which gave us painting and sculpture to see our own quiet moments in our lives as worth cherishing.

Financial Factoids: A copy of Degas' Le Tub, similar to that of the MIA, was sold by Christie's for \$1,989,500 on May 7 2002.

Another copy, in good condition (I might imagine) was sold by Sotheby's for \$3,778,500 in November 2008.

Quotes from Edward Degas:

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.

In painting you must give the idea of the true by means of the false.

Painting is easy when you don't know how, but very difficult when you do.

Everyone has talent at twenty-five. The difficulty is to have it at fifty.

Sources:

Wikipedia biography of Edward Degas

Carol Strickland, The Annotated Mona Lisa (2d ed.)

Brainy Quotes (great source for provocative quotes from the artist for tours)

Degas' Woman in a Bathtub, Le Tub

Metmuseum.org: Heilbrunn Timeline of Art: Degas Bronze Sculpture; Degas The Tub; Degas The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer; Degas Painting & Drawing

Art Institute of Chicago Overview: Degas' The Tub

Musee d'Orsay: Edgar Degas' The Tub