STÄDEL MUSEUM

WALL TEXTS

EN PASSANT
IMPRESSIONISM IN SCULPTURE

UNTIL 25 OCTOBER 2020

EN PASSANT. IMPRESSIONISM IN SCULPTURE

The art current known as Impressionism got underway in Paris around 1870. It can be understood as a reaction to the comprehensive changes industrialization brought about in living conditions. Artists no longer looked for their motifs in the past, but in their immediate surroundings. They depicted above all city life— scenes on the boulevards of Paris, in the opera and the cafés—but also landscapes. These modern themes demanded a new artistic form. In response to the fast pace of the times, an open, sketchy-looking mode of working came into use as a means of lending expression to the transience of the moment. And artists were interested not so much in the realistic portrayal of the world around them as in the representation of their subjective impressions. We associate Impressionism primarily with painting and printmaking. It is a little-known fact that there were also artists in the Impressionist milieu who executed sculptures. This exhibition introduces five of them: Edgar Degas, Auguste Rodin, Medardo Rosso, Paolo Troubetzkoy and Rembrandt Bugatti. They were all referred to as Impressionist sculptors during their lifetimes because they sought to capture movement and ephemerality in their three-dimensional works. To this end, they worked with malleable materials such as wax, plaster, clay and plastiline, forming figures that were only later cast in durable bronze. Rather than making sculptures with the smooth, self-contained surfaces called for by convention, these artists deliberately worked with unevenness and irregularities that cause the light to refract. Visible traces of the working process also contribute to endowing their figures with an effect similar to that of Impressionist paintings. This exhibition does not isolate the sculptures of Impressionism, but shows them in dialogue with paintings, drawings and prints, thus offering insights into the productive interplay between the various artistic mediums within the Impressionist context.

THE IMPRESSIONIST EXHIBITIONS

The eight group exhibitions featuring those avant-gardists who would go down in history as “Impressionists” took place in Paris between 1874 and 1886. They were organized by the artists themselves as an alternative to the official, stateregulated Salon presentations—and a way of liberating themselves from the strict guidelines

of the academy. This room brings together works by artists who participated in the Impressionist exhibitions. The ensemble mirrors the diversity of mediums represented in those shows. Of the approximately two thousand works on display there in total, nearly three quarters were paintings. And apart from numerous drawings and prints, there were also fans and seventeen “Impressionist sculptures”. In the 1870s and ’80s, the only criterion for this classification was inclusion in one of the eight exhibitions. Neither the motif nor the artist’s approach played a role, as we see in the sculptures by Auguste Louis-Marie Ottin and Paul Gauguin on display here, and in Edgar Degas’s Little Dancer Aged Fourteen in the next room.

EDGAR DEGAS (1834–1917)

Edgar Degas was born in Paris in 1834, the son of a bank director. In 1856, following a brief period of study at the art academy, he set out to Italy for three years. Back in Paris, he worked on large-scale history paintings for the Salon exhibitions. Yet he also devoted himself to modern themes, for example ballet dancers, women bathing and scenes at the racecourse. Between 1874 and 1886, Degas presented his works exclusively at the Impressionist exhibitions. Within that framework they were conspicuous on account of the tremendous thematic spectrum they covered, but also the multifarious techniques the artist used to execute them. In addition to oil paintings, they included drawings, pastels, prints and monotypes. He moreover produced a large number of three-dimensional works. With a single exception, however, he did not show these works in public, but kept them concealed in his studio until his death. Starting in 1919, his sculptures were cast in bronze by the extremely renowned A. A. Hébrard foundry. It was primarily through the dissemination of these bronzes that the public came to perceive Degas as a sculptor.

THE FIRST „IMPRESSIONIST SCULPTURE“?

Degas presented a sculpture in public for the first and only time at the sixth Impressionist exhibition (1881). With his Little Dancer Aged Fourteen, he caused a scandal. People objected not only to the materials he used, but also to the motif. To make the figure, the artist had not employed either of the materials accepted by the academy —marble or bronze—but wax, which he combined with textiles. In the nineteenth century, wax was used primarily for anatomical models, not artworks. The depiction of a young ballet dancer was moreover associated with the issue of prostitution, which was rampant behind the scenes of the Paris opera house in those days. The contemporary press responded to Degas’s dancer with such hostility that he never exhibited a sculpture again for the rest of his life. Yet it was the Little Dancer Aged

Fourteen that inspired the art critic Jules Claretie to coin the term “Impressionist sculptors”.

„IMPRESSIONIST SCULPTURE“? A SHORT-LIVED DEBATE

The characteristics of Impressionist painting (light, colour, mood, movement) hardly seem reconcilable with the solid materials of sculpture (stone, bronze, wax, plaster, etc.). Nevertheless, “Impressionist sculpture” was a standard term in the late nineteenth century. In 1881, the critic Jules Claretie was the first to use the designation “Impressionist sculptors” in his review of Edgar Degas’s Little Dancer Aged Fourteen. In 1902, Edmond Claris published an entire book entitled Impressionism in Sculpture. This work was considered a refutation of Charles Baudelaire’s devastating criticism of the sculpture medium: in 1846, the French writer had expounded the view that painting and architecture were superior to sculpture because they specified an unambiguous vantage point. The disadvantage of sculpture, according to Baudelaire, was its viewability from many sides and the accompanying “indeterminacy” of its perception. Claris’s publication offered a stage to artists who argued against Baudelaire and in favour of Impressionism in sculpture. The German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe then went on to devote a chapter of his groundbreaking 1904 Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics to “Impressionism in Sculpture”. After World War I, however, the term “Impressionist” became prevalent in connection with painting, but not with sculpture. Present-day scholarship hardly makes use of the term “Impressionist sculpture”. The exhibition en passant explores this matter and sheds light on its various facets.

SMALL-SCALE SCULPTURES

By virtue of both its size and degree of detail, the Little Dancer Aged Fourteen represents an exception in Degas’s oeuvre— most of his sculptures are much smaller in scale. The motifs he depicted in the sculpture medium were those he favoured throughout his career: dancers, bathers, horses and jockeys. Degas is thought to have executed his three-dimensional works between the 1860s and 1911. To do so, he employed a large number of different materials: over wire armatures he modelled the figures in beeswax, plastiline, plaster or clay. To stabilize them, he used wood, textiles, rope, porcelain or corks from wine bottles. In all but a few cases, he depicted the figures as nudes without pronounced facial features and only summarily conceived limbs. Degas’s sketchy modelling style, the fingerprints deliberately left visible and the figures’ unsmoothed bases create a lively interplay of light and shade comparable to the effect of Impressionist paintings.

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SHADOW PLAYS

Small-scale sculptures served Degas first and foremost as an aid in gaining a better grasp of contours, foreshortenings and motion sequences. He could contemplate them from different angles, turn them, and arrange them alongside and in front of one another, and they enabled him to study complicated poses in depth. He also experimented with the shadows the figures cast in candlelight. This provided him with a means of translating the three-dimensional figures into the two-dimensionality of drawing, while also accommodating his lifelong search for the perfect handling of line. For Degas, modelling was virtually a form of drawing in a different medium: a way of circling around a pictorial idea three-dimensionally as its form etched itself into his subconscious via the sense of touch. He accordingly assigned both techniques the function of thought: “Drawing is a way of thinking, so is modelling.”

FORMAL POSES: ARABESQUE

Degas’s small-scale sculptures of dancers represent a wide spectrum of classical ballet poses, which he modelled in numerous variations. One group of figures, for example, depicts various stages of an arabesque. Degas devoted eight sculptures to this posture alone—one of the most challenging in ballet. He presumably carried out the work complex between 1885 and 1890 under the influence of Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904). The British photographer’s so-called chronophotographs illustrate sequences of movement by means of a series of photographs shot rapidly one after the other. The four bronzes in our exhibition provide insights into the performance of an arabesque from the upright stance to a stage in which the body rests over the right leg in a nearly horizontal position, and finally leans down to form a diagonal.

UNOBSERVED MOMENTS: DANCERS OFFSTAGE

In addition to depictions of classical ballet positions, Degas’s sculptural oeuvre also includes numerous examples of dancers in ‘unobserved’ moments. The artist portrayed them on their breaks, stretching their limbs and adjusting their leotards. Their undignified poses form a conspicuous contrast to the idealized depictions of the human being demanded by the art academy. Many of Degas’s dancers have an awkward quality; at the same time, they are often presented in unusual views. These works set Degas apart from the sculpture of his day. In them, he experimented with the distribution of volume, with weight and counterweight and the most varied possible arrangements of the limbs. Not one of the figures possesses a defined or dominant display side. Quite to the contrary, they lure us to view them from constantly changing vantage points, as they offer ever new, different and suspenseful perspectives and impressions that make the motif fully perceivable only in their entirety.

BATHERS

Bathers are a recurring theme throughout Degas's oeuvre. Hardly any motif preoccupied him as intensely, and in so many different techniques, as the female nude. It was not until the eighth Impressionist exhibition (1886) that he first showed his pastels and monotypes of such scenes. He also carried out a series of sculptures closely related to these works in terms of motif, but very different from one another in character and degree of execution. Many of the figures are narrative in quality and full of detail; others focus on a specific zone of the body or have come down to us only in fragments. The artist's numerous sculptures of bathers helped him clarify certain poses and contours and examine their significance for his two-dimensional oeuvre. In this respect, sculpture was part of an interplay between different artistic mediums that inspired Degas to ever-new experimentation.

HORSES AND JOCKEYS

Depictions of horseraces hold a key position in Degas's oeuvre. The artist discovered this facet of modern recreational activity around 1860 and explored it in various techniques until 1900. He began by modelling three-dimensional figures of horses in order to gain a correct understanding of their complicated movement sequences. After initially depicting them in static poses, from the 1870s onward he experimented increasingly with more dynamic ones and endeavoured to reproduce certain types of gaits. The works assembled here convey an impression of the diversity and vibrancy of his sculptures depicting horses rearing up, trotting and galloping. Degas and his contemporaries were strongly stimulated by the chronophotographs of Étienne-Jules Marey and—particularly—Eadweard Muybridge. In 1878, the latter managed to produce the first photographic sequences of horses performing different gaits.

REMBRANDT BUGATTI (1884–1916)

The animal sculptor Rembrandt Bugatti was the son of a family of artists in Milan. His father Carlo was a designer, his uncle Giovanni Segantini a painter and his brother Ettore later became an automobile designer. The sculptor Paolo Troubetzkoy was a close friend of the family's. Rembrandt Bugatti never had academic training. Not even any anatomical studies—the foundation of animal sculpture from time immemorial—have come down to us. In 1901, at the young age of sixteen, he presented a depiction of several cows at the spring exhibition in Milan. In 1903 his works were on display at the Venice Biennale. Shortly thereafter the family moved to Paris, where Bugatti caught the attention of the bronze founder and art dealer Adrien-Aurélien Hébrard. It was on Hébrard's business premises that the artist had his first solo exhibition in 1904. He presented works at the Paris Salon and the gallery of Alberto Grubicy in Milan the same

year. Bugatti executed the large majority of his oeuvre, some 300 sculptures, in Antwerp —particularly at the city's zoo—between 1906 and 1914. In January 1916, Bugatti took his own life in his Parisian studio.

THE OBSERVER

The self-taught artist Rembrandt Bugatti was active mainly as an animal sculptor. A fundamental attribute of his art is his precise study of his models – initially cows and goats, and from 1903 onwards primarily exotic animals in the modern zoos of Paris and Antwerp. Bugatti emancipated himself from the sculptural tradition that conceived of animals as reflections of human traits. On the contrary, his depictions of panthers, lions, flamingos, etc. are often unprettified portrayals which he modelled directly in front of his subjects. He sacrificed precision of detail to his endeavor to reproduce striking poses and movements. Accordingly, he was already praised as a "young Impressionist sculptor" in the reviews of his first solo exhibition in Paris in 1904, because one could see in his works that he had executed them "sur nature" (in front of nature). Towards the end of his life— around the time World War I broke out—Bugatti changed his style. His works become more block-like, their surfaces more abstract. They seem to herald the stylized forms of Art Deco.

THE LOST-WAX PROCESS (CIRE PERDUE)*

The lost-wax process—a technique for making bronze casts of sculptures—has been in use for thousands of years. It is favoured by artists because it is capable of translating even the smallest details (fingerprints, traces of the working process) from the original model to the metal. The majority of the sculptures in the exhibition were made by the lost-wax method. The materials on view here shed light on the various stages of that process: The point of departure is an original model made of clay, plaster, wood, wax or a modelling compound (e.g. Plastiline). A negative mould of the original model is made from silicon (formerly gelatin) and then encased in plaster. The original model is removed from the negative mould and thus remains extant. The inside of the negative mould is filled with molten wax. The wax model created by this step is fitted with a system of channels required for the casting process and then embedded in a fireproof casting mould (plaster chamotte—a mixture of plaster and brick-dust). The channels lead from the figure to the outside through the compound forming the casting mould. They serve as both a ventilation and a drainage system for the next step, in which the wax is melted out of the casting mould with the aid of steam. A hollow space remains behind. This space is now filled with liquid bronze heated to a temperature of approximately 1200°C and poured in through a funnel. The result is a solid bronze cast, which is removed from the casting mould after a slow cooling process. Now the channels

have to be removed. So-called casting flashes are also visible on the surface of the raw casting. They come about when the bronze seeps into fine cracks that develop in the chamotte mould during the drying process. Finally, the sculpture is worked by a chaser who refines the metal surface by cleaning and smoothing it. The last step is the patination of the surface with the aid of acid and heat to give the sculpture its final colouration.

* The casts presented in the following display were made from a wax model created by the artist Björn Harres of Darmstadt on commission from the Städel Museum. The casting process was carried out in the autumn of 2019 by Bernd Hettinger, Isabelle Kneip, Mauritius Korfmann and Ludwig Lichtenthal of Kunstguss Kastel. Christoph Weigand filmed all steps of the process. The film is on view upstairs in the entrance area to the exhibition. We thank everyone involved for their valuable contributions to this joint project.

MEDARDO ROSSO (1858–1928)

Born in Turin in 1858, Medardo Rosso embarked on studies at the Accademia de Brera in Milan in 1882. The school expelled him the following year after he campaigned for improvements in the life-drawing instruction. The artists' group "La Scapigliatura" (The Dishevelled Ones), who rebelled against bourgeois conventions, had a strong impact on him. They painted in an open, contour-dissolving style resembling that of French Impressionism. Rosso moved to Paris in 1889. There he made the acquaintance of Edgar Degas and exchanged sculptures with Auguste Rodin. Nevertheless, he kept his distance from the many artists' circles of the time. He took part in only one exhibition in 1893 and one in 1895, presenting works from his Milanese period and motifs of big-city life in Paris. It was the Parisian world fair of 1900 that made Rosso famous as a sculptor and caster. His first solo exhibitions took place in Berlin and Leipzig in 1902. In 1910, his work attracted a great deal of attention within the framework of an exhibition of French Impressionism in Florence. Rosso returned to Milan on account of the First World War and remained there until his death in 1928.

AT A GLANCE

The French press already dubbed Rosso the founder of Impressionist sculpture as far back as 1886. Edmond Claris emphatically underscored this assessment in his book Impressionism in Sculpture (1902). One reason for this was Rosso's endeavour to capture his first impression of his motif. He represented the brevity of the instant in deliberately hazy contours. He frequently also depicted the surrounding space— which he considered an inseparable part of the figure—as an unformed mass. These ambiguities tend to make the actual motif difficult to discern. Rosso usually carried out all of the working steps himself, from the modelling in clay to the casting. From 1906 onwards, he did not develop any new motifs but concentrated on varying the ones

already in existence. To this end he availed himself of various casting materials (bronze, plaster and wax) and colour mediums. He moreover explored different types of surface treatment. He often left traces of the working process behind on the finished sculpture, for example air bubbles, seams and remnants of fireclay. The practice of experimenting with different variations also had an impact on his drawings and photographs. Rosso was very adamant in his stipulations for the contemplation of his works. To ensure their optimal overall impression, he used lighting, bases of certain heights and, in part, very confined display cases to define certain vantage points. He thus took a stand against the traditional multiple viewability of sculpture. He also refuted the accusation— formulated by Charles Baudelaire in 1846—that sculpture was inferior to painting because of the indefiniteness of the specifications it gave the viewer.

GENRE OR CARICATURE?

Life in the big city is a prevalent theme in the paintings and prints of French Impressionism. Depictions of Parisian boulevards alternate with those of figures taking strolls along the Seine and performances on the opera and theatre stages. These motifs hardly find counterparts in the sculpture of the late nineteenth century. The works assembled in this room—by Ferruccio Crespi (1861–1891), Paolo Troubetzkoy (1866–1938), Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929) and Leonardo Bistolfi (1859–1933)—areexceptions. They are three-dimensional representations of scenes from everyday life. By virtue of their humorous and unprettified portrayals, Crespi's ill-matched couple with the unusual title After the Bath! and Bourdelle's sleeping man on a sofa are reminiscent of contemporary caricatures. They bear a resemblance to the works of Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), whose formal stylistic devices of exaggeration and overstatement they share. As models for his caricatures, Daumier produced small-scale sculptures that were never shown in public until after his death. His sketchy modelling style and the dynamic of the bodily forms had a clear impact on the works of the following generation of sculptors.

PAOLO TROUBETZKOY (1866–1938)

Paolo Troubetzkoy was born in Intra on Lago Maggiore in 1866, the son of an aristocratic Russian diplomat and an American opera diva. He accordingly later signed his works with various versions of his first name: Paolo, Pavel or Paul Troubetzkoy. In 1884, after just a few months in different sculptors' workshops in Milan, he abandoned formal training in favour of working autonomously. He made his debut with a figure of a horse in an exhibition at the Accademia di Brera in Milan in 1886 and celebrated his international breakthrough as a portraitist the same year. The self-taught artist accepted an engagement as a guest professor at the State Academy of Art in Moscow in 1898/99.

There he revolutionized sculpture training by having all plaster casts removed from the studios, thus banning the obligatory study of antiquity. In 1900, the Parisian Exposition Universelle awarded Troubetzkoy the Grand Prix for his portrait of Leo Tolstoy riding a horse. In 1906 he moved to the French metropolis, and from 1914 to 1921, the successful artist lived in the U.S. From 1921 to 1932, he once again lived and worked in Paris before returning to Italy, where he spent the final years of his life.

VIBRATING BRONZE

Throughout his career, Paolo Troubetzkoy was famous for the “nervous” and “forceful” modelling style that characterizes his portraits, monuments and animal depictions. Particularly his elegant likenesses convey a sense of vitality and immediacy in the vigorously worked surfaces of their hair and clothing. The accordingly rich play of light and shadow, in turn, creates nuanced colour impressions. The constructive framework and self-contained form of a figure, on the other hand, were of secondary importance to the artist. He advised his pupils: “Direct your minds to nature, use your abilities to deliberate […] . You will find in sculpture above all a general mass.” Troubetzkoy thus studied the outer, natural appearance of things, entirely unbound by academic tradition and instruction. In Edmond Claris’s 1902 publication, he was accordingly described as a worthy exponent of Impressionist sculpture.

AUGUSTE RODIN (1840–1917)

Auguste Rodin was born in Paris in 1840. From 1854 onwards, he took instruction in drawing and painting in preparation for applying to the École des Beaux-Arts but was rejected by that institution repeatedly. He set up his first studio in 1864. At the time, he was also working for the sculptor Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse (1824–1887) in Paris and Brussels. Rodin first exhibited at the Salon in 1875. During travels in Italy, he was particularly impressed with the art of antiquity and the work of Michelangelo. After returning to Paris, he presented the sculpture The Age of Bronze at the Salon, causing a scandal but also earning initial recognition. The appreciation for his work took on concrete form in the state commission for the Gates of Hell (1880), which provided him with a spacious studio and financial security. The work never reached completion, but it did serve as a basis for numerous individual figures and new combinations (assemblages). Rodin made his ultimate breakthrough around 1890. His studio became a magnet for artists and art lovers. He received numerous commissions, also from abroad, and employed an increasing number of assistants to carry out his designs in marble and bronze. To this day, Rodin’s oeuvre is considered the inception of “modern sculpture”.

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ENLIVED SURFACES AND ACTIVE VIEWERS

In this room, key workgroups illustrate the attributes that were decisive for Rodin's classification as an Impressionist. The architectural setting is modelled after that of the major solo exhibition Rodin organized himself in the Pavillon de l'Alma in 1900. In response to that show, critics called him the most important "Impressionist sculptor" along with Medardo Rosso. They praised Rodin particularly for taking nature as his orientation and for his expressive surfaces. These surfaces accounted for the lifelike quality of his works and the shimmering plays of light and shade of the kind Impressionist painters also sought to capture. What is more, the artist set great store in the staging of his sculptures. He had precise ideas about how they were to be arranged and aimed for the direct encounter between the work and the beholder. He called upon the viewers to walk around the sculptures, thus assigning them an active role.

RODIN AND PHOTOGRAPHY

From 1877 onwards, Rodin used photography, initially only within the confines of his workshop, for the purpose of documentation and as part of the working process. This changed when, in 1896, the artist—who had meanwhile gained public recognition as a sculptor—met the amateur photographer Eugène Druet. Druet's photos far exceed the bounds of pure documentation. He staged Rodin's sculptures photographically, showing them in atmospheric light and shade situations. Because he published and exhibited his photos, they had a lasting impact on the public's image of the sculptor's works. The productive collaboration between the two men ended after a dispute. In 1903, Rodin entered into a contract with Jacques-Ernest Bulloz, a professional photographer. Bulloz's views are more conventional and prosaic than Druet's. They also differ strongly from those of the pictorialists, who were guided primarily by artistic considerations in their effort to approximate painting with photography. Edward Steichen, for example, stylized Rodin as an artistic genius by combining a photo of the Thinker with a portrait of the sculptor.