Even though Edgar Degas only exhibited Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old, once, it was a sensation surrounded by controversy. He revealed the sculpture in April of 1881 at the sixth Impressionist exhibition. Many reacted to his naturalistic portrayal of a young dancer, and when actual performers were represented, they were only the most famous stars. For nearly all visitors to the sixth Impressionist exhibition, Degas’ depiction of a practicing trainee instead of a graceful performer was an unexpected surprise. Degas, however, believed that his sculpture was realistic. He commented, “...this statuette is the only truly modern attempt I know in sculpture.”

Dancers typically came from the lower classes. They were crushed beneath the weight of their tutus and restricted by their shoes. To appear more lifelike, Degas added blue fibers, laid down on gray wove paper, 18 7/8 x 24 1/2 in., National Gallery of Art, 1920/1921. 

While over a hundred years ago Little Dancer was shocking for many, in 1881, Degas said, “I have a young monster in my studio referred to as little better than a prostitute, calling her “the Opera rat in her modern form, learning for young dancers. Instead of depicting a carefully proportioned professional in the middle of a graceful arrangement, Degas depicts Mlle. Gautier, as she would have seen her a young student straining to learn through hard work and practice. Her exertion expression, with her head bowed back, and mouth half-closed, suggests that she is striving to meet an imagined vision of perfection and grace. Little Dancer captures the reality of the young dancer struggling with the hopes of achieving future fame. With her hopeful gaze and adolescent figure, Degas’ figure moves between two realms of the ballet that of the clumsy young beginner and the poised and elegant professional.”


discussion questions
Why was it controversial for Edgar Degas to depict a young ballet dancer?
Do you agree with the Degas estate’s decision to posthumously exhibit Little Dancer? Why or why not?

Which skirt, short or knee-length, do you think is more appropriate for Little Dancer? Why?

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The Tumultuous Tutu

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EDGAR DEGAS
French, 1834–1917

LITTLE DANCER, FOURTEEN YEARS OLD
(LA PETIT DANSEUSE DE QUATORZE ANS)
1881, cast ca. 1920–21, plaster, 39 x 19 1/2 x 20 in.

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