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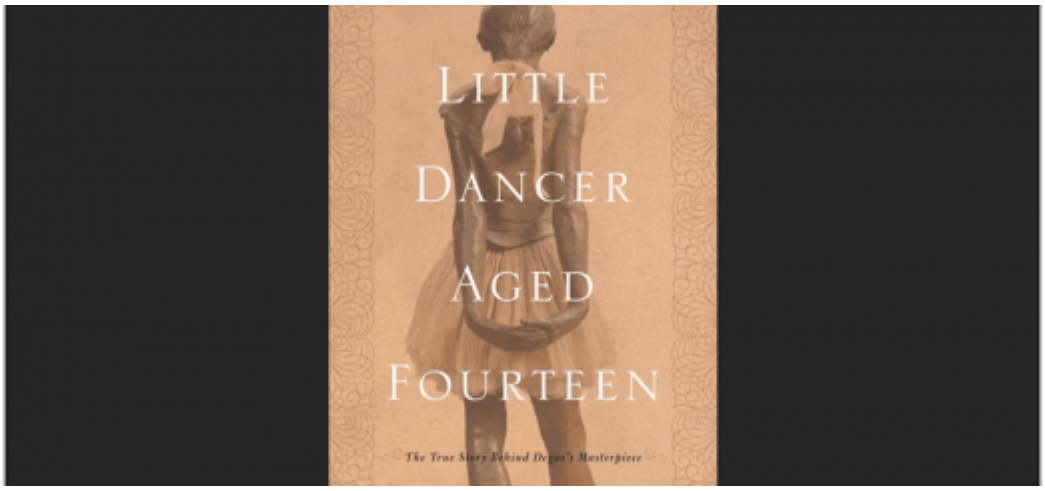

Photo: RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

Marie Geneviève Van Goethem, aka "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen"

by Carolyn Merritt

Born June 7, 1865, in the then-slum of Montmartre, Paris, to impoverished Belgian immigrants, she was the middle of three children. Her death and the scope of her life remain unknown, but she is immortalized, trapped forever in adolescence, in Edgar Degas's famed sculpture, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. In Camille Laurens's book of the same name, Marie takes center stage, alongside the author's fascination with her subject, in an engaging work that combines elements of #metoo, "history from below," critical art history, and autobiography. Linking model to artist, Laurens theorizes Marie's life via Degas's archives and notes. Exploring scant personal records in relation to well-documented accounts of conditions among *fin de siècle* Paris's working poor, Laurens attempts to excavate something of Marie's life. The result elevates and honors Marie, while searching for a truth beyond reach.

Degas's *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* premiered at the Salon des Indépendants in April 1881—referred to now as the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition, a collective of artists who, in response to near-universal rejection, renounced the conservative constraints of the official salons. The three-foot-tall wax figure, enclosed under glass, wears a silk bodice, a short tulle and gauze tutu, and fabric ballet slippers, and has human hair tied in a satin ribbon. Exhibition attendees were repelled and perplexed by what appeared more like a doll, an ethnographic or anatomical curiosity, than a work of art. Marble and bronze were the materials of the day; wax suggested a corpse or colonial-era slave exhibitions. More shocking was Degas's realistic depiction of his subject—a "rat" of the Paris Opera Ballet, a poor girl who toiled like a sweatshop worker, whose body belonged to the Opera, often in manifold ways. Critics saw in her a symbol of the city's and the ballet world's underbellies, of the uneducated, impoverished masses; they labeled her ugly, "half idiotic," a criminal, an animal, a "flower of the gutter" (p. 4). Degas never exhibited the sculpture again, but after his death, his heirs had 22 bronze copies cast. One resides in Paris's Musée d'Orsay, while the original wax version is in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

Laurens paints a vivid picture of the distinct milieus within which Degas and Marie moved and intersected. Marie was just five years old

when Paris was under siege after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Archival records indicate her family moved nine times in twenty years (1862–1882), and that her father, a tailor, disappeared from her life early, leaving her mother, a laundress, to raise three girls alone. "Childhood" did not exist for most—no public education, little protection against exploitation, laws governing child labor did not apply to the Opera, and sexual minority ended after age 12. Laurens dispassionately sums up Marie's mother's position: "Having three daughters was both a plague and a boon to someone without money. You could always sell them" (p. 16).

Never has ballet seemed so sinister. Laurens pulls the curtain back with help from writers of the time, including Theophile Gautier, whose *Le Rat* (1866) exposed the grim reality of life for the Opera's young dancers. They worked ten- to twelve-hour days, six days a week, suffered fines and the threat of dismissal for absences, all for a mere two francs daily (the cost of an actual rat in Paris during the Prussian siege.) Advancement, rare and costly, required additional financial investment from overworked, underpaid, impoverished children. More commonly, young girls advanced into relationships with men of means, who "considered [it] good form to 'keep one's dancer,'" in a lurid ambience that reeks of trafficking: "What would be denounced today as pedophilia, pimping, and the corruption of minors was at the time normal practice, when 'the prevailing moral code was a total lack of moral code'" (p. 20). The fortunate few became stars, some became teachers (like Marie's younger sister) or, as courtesans, found protection. Countless others died of tuberculosis or descended into alcoholism, crime, or prostitution.

Degas, from a well-to-do family, changed his name from *de Gas* to downplay his privilege. A painter by trade, his eyesight deteriorated so he taught himself to sculpt. Unlike his male companions behind the scenes at the ballet, Degas was reportedly chaste, even fearful and dismissive of women. Still, while popular stories sensationalized the ballet, framing ballerinas as vectors of disease who lured men of good breeding down the primrose path, Degas situated dancers firmly within the proletariat, recognizing and portraying their art as labor, their bodies as finely tuned machines. In this sense, Degas championed his models. Indeed, he intervened on behalf of more than one, pleading for better wages, and he paid his models more than they earned at the Opera.

At the same time, Degas was in thrall to the pseudoscientific racism of the day. His only other works in the 1881 exhibit were "Four Criminal Physiognomies," sketches he composed while attending the 1880 trials of four men accused of murder. Comparisons with photographs of the time show that Degas altered the men's faces in accordance with studies of physiognomy and "criminal ethnography" (p. 43), which, respectively, purported links between physical appearance and behavior, including criminal tendencies. Degas's drawings and his influences—of a piece with Social Darwinist arguments that deemed poverty and suffering as destiny rather than inequality—underscore the anxieties of the age, in particular, anxieties of some in the upper classes amidst the changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization. Laurens suggests that Degas also changed Marie's face to link her to her social environment. In an "are you sitting down?" moment, the author asks the reader to stop, to consider that the sculpture may not look anything like Marie.

Degas, always grouped with the Impressionists through association, despised the label; his work and notes alike bespeak his realist agenda. If his conversion to the "blind man's trade" arose from necessity, his desire for reality fueled it: "for an exactness so perfect that it gives the sense of life, one has to resort to three dimensions" (p. 16). Laurens posits that Degas altered Marie in a tangled search for truth, to reveal life as it was and raise questions about the status quo. In the case of *Little Dancer*, that truth was the "tragic and already determined ... destiny of this very young girl" (p. 55). Reactions like that of critic Paul Mantz, who likened the sculpture to a public service announcement, exemplify Degas' success:

*Degas is no doubt a moralist; he perhaps knows things about the dancers of the future that we do not. He gathered from the espaliers of the theatre a precociously depraved flower, and he shows her to us withered before her time. The intellectual result has been reached. The bourgeois admitted to contemplate this wax creature remain stupefied for a moment and one hears fathers cry: God forbid my daughter should become a dancer.**

Artistic license aside, if *Little Dancer* is a disfigured Marie, was Degas' execution—shaped by the same class-based racism that colored the sculpture's reception—justified by his goal to show the truth of her tragedy? Laurens doesn't resolve this question.

That Marie's ultimate tragedy was her relation to Degas is heartbreaking. Modeling paid better for fewer work hours and left her with the

free time priceless to someone in her situation. Records indicate the Opera fined Marie for absences, then booted her during a period of increased modeling. Her gamble is understandable, her story downright Dickensian. The trail goes cold soon after Marie's departure from the Opera.

Laurens devotes the final two chapters primarily to her search for Marie beyond Degas. Anyone who has conducted historical research will relate to Laurens's frustration and excitement at the archives. She finds a strange symmetry between the sculpture itself—X-ray images revealed a surprising assortment of random objects inside, including paintbrush handles, rags, wood shavings, cotton wadding, drinking glasses, and cork stoppers—and her own methods. She expresses guilt over her limitations, for having "filled [Marie] in with anecdotes the way her sculpture is filled in with bric-a-brac" (p. 113). The archives led Laurens to secrets in her own family history, yielding further ruminations on the role of imagination and empathy in excavating the past. Recalling her fascination with ballet as a child, she remembers the teacher who struck her sister with a switch, her father's swift withdrawal of his daughters from the school. The scandal at NYCB, decades in the making, immediately comes to my mind. A colleague's description of ballet's violence, in its emphasis on perfection and impossibility, and my challenge of this depiction, are also fresh in my mind. Again, I wonder if misogyny and abuse—physical, emotional, sexual—arise from the form, from its history and mythology, or if they simply remain part of the social fabric, and spring from the present in new and different ways.

How odd that I opened *Little Dancer* 154 years to the day after Van Goethem's birth. More than a century and a half have passed, and yet, as Laurens points out, Marie's story lives on. We can go to a museum or to a computer to admire the sculpture and ponder her life, sure. But we can also turn on the TV and see Marie's tragedy reflected in images of children in cages. Laurens finds Marie's contemporary in a young Syrian refugee forced to leave school, to work in a tile factory to support his family. That the examples are manifold is our collective shame.

Laurens's portrait of Van Goethem is by necessity partial, leaving as many questions as answers. Like a sculptor aiming for a semblance of life, the author adjusts her sights beyond the facts, on Marie's soul, on the essence hidden beneath the young dancer's closed eyes.

* Paul Mantz, "Exposition des oeuvres des artistes indépendants," in *Les Temps*. Paris: France, 1881, p. 3.

Camille Laurens (translation by Willard Wood), *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. New York: Other Press, 2018. 166 pp.

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