

Age shall not wither: show celebrates getting older

Mark Brown
Arts correspondent

Negative perceptions of ageing and older people are being challenged through the works of famous artists at an exhibition that opened yesterday.

The show includes works by Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henry Moore and Maggi Hambling, as well as pieces commissioned from three contemporary artists.

"Ageing is the most important subject on the planet," said Tom Kirkwood, director of Newcastle University's institute of ageing and health, which is behind the exhibition at the city's Great North Museum: Hancock.

"Life expectancy is the biggest thing that will change humanity in the 21st century. We face other major challenges of course, climate change experts say, but the fact our lives are getting longer is just enormous in its implications."

Degas had a progressive retinal eye disease from his 30s which, in all likelihood, contributed to the wonderfully blurred, hazier backgrounds of his later and better works, including the Ballet Dancers painting in the show on loan from the National Gallery.

Renoir wrote that had Degas died at 50 he'd be no more than a footnote.

Renoir himself had rheumatoid arthritis and could not hold a paintbrush in later life. Instead he turned to sculpture and employed a younger artist to form the clay following his instructions, as in the Mother and Child bronze in the exhibition.

The show is trying to shine a light on many aspects of a large subject. The inclusion of Henry Moore's illustrations for *The Seven Ages of Man* aims to highlight the fact that ageing is a life-long process that begins in the womb. Another Moore drawing is of the hands of Dorothy Hodgkin, one of Britain's most important scientists, who suffered rheumatoid arthritis from the age of 24.



The Brady Sisters by Susie Rea and (below) Degas's blurred Ballet Dancers on show in Newcastle Photograph: National Gallery



Three artists - Jennie Pedley, Andrew Carnie and Annie Cattrell - have collaborated with and followed scientists at the institute to produce works for the show. Cattrell observed brain autopsies before creating her works, which examine how memory is stored and include sculptures of the hippocampus and amygdala in a brain-shaped cave.

Kirkwood and the show's curator, Lucy Jenkins, said they hoped visitors would leave the exhibition with more of a spring in their step.

"I hope people will take a lot of positives from this show, that we shouldn't fear old age," Jenkins said.

"The fact that people are living longer is really good for the economy," added Kirkwood. Everyone needed to think more positively about ageing, he said.

"The way things are going now, the vast majority of us are going to live to a ripe old age and if there has to come a point when you look in the mirror and you don't like what you see that's very undermining for your self-esteem and the quality of your life.

"This is why art, which can reach in to people and get them to think and respond differently, is so important."

Coming of Age: The Art and Science of Ageing is on until 2 March.