

The New Criterion

Features December 2017

The necessity of Rodin

by *Eric Gibson*

On four exhibitions across the world that commemorate the centennial of Auguste Rodin's death.

The idea was too tempting to resist: see as many of the displays commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of Auguste Rodin's death (born in 1840, he died in 1917) as possible, in an effort to take, once and for all, the measure of this artist and to come to terms with the paradox of his legacy. Though widely recognized as "the father of modern sculpture," Rodin was repudiated by those who came after, most famously by Constantin Brancusi.

No single exhibition has ever seemed equal to the task of capturing the essence of this artist. Perhaps, I thought, an approach as various and discontinuous as Rodin's art itself, one that took in multiple exhibitions, would do the trick. The checklists would overlap, but the individual emphases would vary, producing a kaleidoscopic image of the artist through whose multiple facets and fragments might emerge a clearer picture than that provided by a unitary, more tightly circumscribed effort.

But which exhibitions? There are eight in the United States, one in France, and one in Mexico, as well as six permanent collection installations in America. I eliminated any that didn't focus exclusively on Rodin, and those

featuring large numbers of the posthumous bronze casts that have so distorted our perception of the artist. That left four shows: Paris, New York, Philadelphia, and Cleveland. The reaction against Rodin has left the impression that his impact was fleeting. Yet these shows proved the opposite. He is the indispensable man without whom twentieth-century sculpture would not have played out as it did.

In Philadelphia, the Rodin Museum makes its 1929 copy of *The Kiss* the centerpiece of an installation of nearly twenty works in bronze and plaster centered on "the theme of the passionate embrace." ¹ It is a curious show. Though most of the works, such as *Eternal Springtime* (1884), are in line with the erotic subtext of the exhibition, the more maternal, nurturing depictions seem out of place. Yet the emphasis placed on *The Kiss*, along with the stone sculptures elsewhere in the museum such as *Danaid* (*The Source*)

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(1885–1902) invite us to consider the problem of Rodin's marble sculptures as a whole.

The marbles have long been the fault line in Rodin criticism. In 1972 the art historian Leo Steinberg republished, in *Other Criteria*, a 1963 catalogue essay to a Rodin show in a New York gallery that wrote the marbles out of the canon as “dulcified replicas made by hired hands.” The real Rodin lay in “the plasters, the work in terra-cotta and wax, and the finest bronze casts. Rodin himself rarely drives his own chisel; he kneads and palps clay, and where a surface has not been roughed and shocked by his own fingering nerves, it tends to remain blind, blunted, or overblown by enlargement; rhetoric given off by false substance.” Two years later the British-born modernist sculptor William Tucker dismissed the marbles as “vulgar, facile, unthought-out and pander[ing] to just that Salon taste which he had explicitly challenged in *The Age of Bronze*.”

The opposite case was advanced by John L. Tancock in his 1976 catalogue of the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia. He wrote sympathetically and insightfully about the marbles, as did Daniel Rosenfeld five years later in the catalogue to the National Gallery's retrospective, “Rodin Rediscovered.” Both men set the artist's stone sculpture within the context of late-nineteenth-century taste and artistic practice, and Rodin's overall oeuvre.

So: you could admire Rodin as a modernist or a traditionalist, but not both. Yet you cannot pick and choose with artists; you must take them whole and make what you can of them. Can we, in this centenary year, reconcile the nineteenth-century artist Rodin was with the twentieth-century artist we want him to be?



Auguste Rodin, Orpheus and Eurydice, 1893, Marble, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Let's start by recognizing that while it's true that Rodin used an army of praticiens, it's also true that this was standard practice at the time and had been so for centuries. Steinberg's essay first appeared at a rare point in history when this was not the case, the artist's individual touch then being an article of modernist faith. A few years later the pendulum swung back, when Donald Judd and the Minimalists turned to "hired hands." Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and others continue this practice today. Are those same critics going to damn Rodin for what they excuse in Jeff Koons? And how can we reject the

marbles because Rodin never touched them when the posthumous bronzes— some of which were produced as recently as the 1980s—are accepted despite that fact?

Besides, Rodin was involved with his marbles. Some he carved entirely himself. He closely supervised the practitioners' work on the rest and finished each of them. Moreover, the iconic status and pedestrian nature of *The Kiss* have blinded us to Rodin's ambitions for his marble sculpture—one as large as that for his work in other media. Rodin adopted Michelangelo's practice of *non-finito*, leaving roughened passages of stone to suggest forms emerging from the block, in part to break with the academic conventions of uniformity of surface and handling, but also to convey a feeling for sculptural process. He used the same technique, along with generalizing the details of his finished forms in an effort to make them more evanescent, as if fused with the surrounding light and atmosphere.

Rodin's ambitions for his marbles were every bit as modernist as in other media.

We see this in *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1893) in the "Rodin at the Met."² Two figures are set within and against a concave backdrop, the stone masterfully shaped and roughened to create a dramatic play of light and shade evoking the tenebrous entrance to Hades from which Orpheus rescues the shade of his deceased wife. The two protagonists stand before it in full light, their forms subtly modeled by a play of lights and darks across their surfaces. And to distinguish Eurydice's otherworldly incarnation from Orpheus's earthly self, Rodin has suppressed physical detail in her figure in an effort, through his handling of material and the play of light, to create the illusion of a ghostly apparition.

So Rodin's ambitions for his marbles were every bit as—dare one say it—modernist as in other media. But we don't always see them that way, partly because of the contradictions inherent in that ambition. Michelangelo's *non-finito* asserts the materiality of the block; illusionistic, atmospheric effects deny it. But because the same technique could not do both things simultaneously, and because stone's obdurate materiality is insuperable, Rodin's ambition outran the means available to realize it. It would take Medardo Rosso in the next generation to reconcile the conflicting aims of materiality and illusion in modernist sculpture.

Then there is the problem of display. I wrote the above description of *Orpheus and Eurydice* looking at photographs of the work in the Spring 1981 Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, published on the occasion of a reinstallation of the museum's Rodins. It is similar to the way the sculpture looks in a photograph taken in Rodin's studio that Rosenfeld included in his National Gallery essay. They read as they do because the photographers understood that with Rodin's marbles, as with his work in other media, every square inch of the surface counts and must be so treated in lighting them. Now at the Met, by contrast, the sculpture is lighted in a more conventional manner, in terms of major and minor masses. Thus the two figures are brilliantly illuminated, with the background stone a more or less even play of half-tones.

The problem was even more pronounced at "Rodin: 100 Years" in Cleveland.³ Direct sunlight pours through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, eliminating virtually all traces of shadow on *The Fall of the Angels*

(1890–1900), and with them any articulation of form, leaving us to contemplate little more than a glowing white blob.

I don't know whether, in the end, I share the views of Tancock, Rosenfeld, and other scholars that the marbles rank with the best of Rodin's work. I do know that I would like to find out. It's time for a well-selected, well-installed exhibition that will allow us to ponder them anew.

Rodin's importance for modern sculpture is commonly said to derive from his return to naturalism, his invention of the partial figure, and his rethinking of the public monument. All true of course. But in my view his contribution is more fundamental: he made possible a figural art in sculpture in the twentieth century. This was the lesson of the show in Paris. 4



Installation view of "Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition" at the Grand Palais, Paris. Photo: Grand Palais

In its scale and sprawl, “Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition” at the Grand Palais was nothing if not Rodinian. Featuring over 200 works by him and over 150 more by artists ranging from Edgar Degas to Rachel Whiteread, it sought to reveal both Rodin’s work and his impact on those who followed, and did so in good measure. If there was a flaw, it was that it was at once too broadly and too narrowly focused. Although any artist involved with the figure, in whatever form, seems to have been included, the organizers’ definition of “figure” was, generally speaking, that of the closed monolith. This led to some distortions and missed opportunities. For example, Joel Shapiro was absent. Julio González was represented by *Jeune Fille Nostalgique* (1934–36), a modeled bronze head. Yet in many ways his welded constructions, such as *Femme au miroir* (1936–37), are closer in spirit to Rodin, despite their sculptural language being so different. None were included.

What would twentieth-century sculpture have looked like without Rodin’s transformative, galvanizing influence? We cannot know for certain, of course, but the show gave us an idea. Absent Picasso’s Cubist constructions, I suspect it would have resembled the *juste milieu* tendency in late-nineteenth-century French painting, wherein artists broke with tradition but without embracing the most radical tendencies of their time. A similar impulse informed the efforts of Lehmbruck, Maillol, Minne, Dalou, Meunier, Duchamp-Villon, Barlach, Zadkine, early Picasso, and others. Many were there, presented as Rodin’s heirs. But their inclusion only highlighted how little they had in common with him and what he represented.

Rodin’s revolution was to introduce a wholly new language of the figure, one that evolved in three stages. The first stage was *The Age of Bronze* (1875–76), a life-size male nude and Rodin’s first major work of sculpture. So realistic was it that when it was first exhibited Rodin was accused of having taken a plaster mold of his model. Rodin was mortified, but he should have been proud. For he had, at a stroke, cleared the ground and swept away all of academic classicism’s accumulated rhetoric and convention, opening the way for something completely new. At the same time, he established the centrality of the single figure, an idiom previously limited to portraiture and public monuments.

There’s a refreshing back-to-basics quality to *The Age of Bronze*, as if Rodin had asked himself, “What is sculpture about? It’s about the figure. OK, let’s start there.” What he told someone about an earlier effort, a clay *Bacchante* that broke apart shortly after completion, applies to this work: he sought “to approach as closely as possible to nature, to the very point of extinction of form, and without adornment from my brain.” Each of the four shows featured a cast of this work, and it’s extraordinary how fresh and new it felt each time I saw it. Rodin’s “extinction of form” produced a work that is open, transparent, and self-revealing in a way few later works are. Perhaps only Picasso’s *Bull’s Head* (1942) and Anthony Caro’s slender, floor-hugging steel constructions of the mid-1960s rival it.



Auguste Rodin, Pair of Standing Nude Male Figures Demonstrating the Principles of Contrapposto, ca. 1911, Terracotta, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

But Rodin still had to invent a new figural rhetoric—a language of bodily pose and gesture—to replace the old one. For this he turned to Michelangelo, traveling to Italy in 1875. The results can be seen in such works as *Adam* (1880), *Eve* (1881), and *The Thinker* (1880), a rare, close-up view of this last having been possible in Paris, where the plaster sat on a low pedestal.

This was stage two, an idea of the human body as carrier of meaning in its own right, in which the pose is the gesture. Yet the limits of Michelangelo—or Rodin’s reading of him—are also evident here, in the overplayed, hypertrophied musculature. *The Thinker* is surely the only figure ever depicted in an attitude of restful introspection whose every sinew is flexed as if engaged in a life-or-death struggle. And so we get to stage three, the *Gates of Hell*.

There’s a refreshing back-to-basics quality to *The Age of Bronze*.

The Gates began as a commission in 1880 for a pair of entrance doors to the (ultimately never built) Musée des Arts Décoratifs. A cast of it exists at the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia and a plaster of it was shown in Paris. Rodin worked on it for the remainder of his life, leaving it unfinished at his death. It was in the Gates that Rodin became his most radically inventive. He pushed the Michelangelesque aesthetic of pose as gesture virtually to the breaking point, twisting, contorting, and compressing the human figure as it never had been previously—even chopping it up: Rodin, a longtime admirer and collector of antique sculpture, appropriated the idea of the fragment, thus inventing what would become a staple of modernist sculpture, the partial figure. This turned plaster, previously a journeyman material, into an instrument of vanguard experimentation, since unlike clay it can be cut, carved, and painted after it dries. Later, Rosso, Matisse, and Giacometti would pick up on this.

As if all this weren't enough, Rodin used these new figures and figure fragments as collage elements, attaching the plaster forms to each other, combining and recombining them in myriad ways. It's an extension of the back-to-basics approach of The Age of Bronze, only more radical: the figure had to be blown up and a new rhetoric formulated from its parts individually and collectively.

Rodin's restless experimentation on the Gates and his inability to get the work to a point of tools-down completion transformed the practice of sculpture from making to searching, from the creation of self-contained objects to a continuing quest, a drive to attain the unattainable. This outlook, of course, defined the second half of Giacometti's career.

And so the Gates became the laboratory in which modern sculpture was born. Rodin's idea of the figure as an idiom open to limitless reimagining was his gift to the twentieth century. From Matisse and Brancusi through David Smith and beyond, it would become the ground on which much sculpture would take root and grow.

It was but one of five such gifts, the others being contour, volume, surface, and the silhouette. Further study would be required to determine exactly how these ideas passed into the bloodstream of twentieth-century sculpture, but they did. ("I have always considered line contour as being a comment on mass space and more acute than bulk," Smith wrote in a notebook.) But certainly one transmitter was Brancusi.



Installation view of “Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition” at the Grand Palais, Paris. Photo: Grand Palais

One of the most remarkable journeys aficionados of modern sculpture can take is to travel the few hundred yards from Rodin’s *The Kiss* to Gallery 188 of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, there to contemplate Brancusi’s 1913 sculpture of the same name. His repudiation of everything Rodin stood for here and in his other works on display appears sweeping, remorseless, even. Yet there are aspects of Brancusi that are profoundly Rodinian.

Contour and volume are central to Rodin’s aesthetic. He told one writer that “translation of the human body in terms of the exactness of its contours gives shapes which are nervous, solid, abundant.” To another he recounted a lesson imparted to him by a decorative sculptor when he was just starting out: “never think of forms as planes, but always as volumes. Consider a surface only as a protruding volume—as a tip, however wide, pointing at you.”

They are essential to Brancusi’s aesthetic, too. To take one example, in Philadelphia’s *Torso of a Young Girl* (1923), a small marble that resembles a bottom-heavy lozenge with its top sheared off, contour tautly delineates form, while surface is a continuous, outward-pressing skin suggesting the pulsation of organic life. And, as the gleaming, polished *Bird in Space* (1923) attests, surfaces were as aesthetically significant to Brancusi as they were to Rodin.

From Brancusi to Henry Moore: in a series of sculptures from the 1930s, such as *Four-Piece Composition: Reclining Figure*, the handling of form and surface is identical. This can hardly have been a coincidence. Brancusi’s aesthetic of direct carving was a formative influence on Moore; the Englishman closely studied all the art that he saw; and he had visited the artist’s studio in Paris around

this time.

Surfaces were as aesthetically significant to Brancusi as they were to Rodin.

The silhouette derives from Balzac (1898). In her 1993 biography, Ruth Butler quotes Rodin saying that he had placed it “in the courtyard so that I could see it against the sky.” Around the same time he explained to the poet and critic Camille Mauclair—in words that could have been uttered by Giacometti—that in making sculpture for the open air, artists consider contour and “value”:

. . . think about what one sees of a person stood up against the light of the twilight sky; a very precise silhouette, filled by a dark coloration, with indistinct details. The rapport between this dark coloration and the tone of the sky is the value, that is to say, that which gives the notion of material substance to the body. . . . All that we see essentially of a statue standing high in place, and all that carries, is its movement, its contour, and its value.

Edward Steichen’s photos of Balzac set against a moonlit sky, included in the Met’s show, give a vivid sense of the effect Rodin was after. He had been traumatized by the negative reaction to Balzac when it was first exhibited, and he was ecstatic over Steichen’s photos. One of the wall texts quotes from a letter to the photographer: “You will make the world understand my ‘Balzac’ through your pictures.”



Edward J. Steichen, Rodin—The Thinker, 1902, Gum bichromate print, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: The Estate of Edward Steichen / Artists Rights Society (ARS)

I'm not saying Rodin is the only source for sculptors' concerns with contour, volume, surface, and the silhouette. But they are such recurrent features of twentieth-century sculpture, and as a group so unique to him, that we must count Rodin a major progenitor.

As one would expect for a native son, the Paris show did Rodin proud. The American exhibitions, however, are in many ways perfunctory, disappointing affairs. There are no publications, just wall texts and pamphlets. In Philadelphia there is confusion and lack of focus. And while the Met's installation of Adam allows visitors a rare opportunity to study it from all sides, one has to contend with the marbles' flawed lighting scheme and the strange decision to display small bronzes in cabinets with bat tleship-gray interiors—dark against dark.

Most disappointing is Cleveland. Their display has its high points, such as the three-foot-tall plaster enlargement of the head of Pierre de Wissant from the *Burghers of Calais* (1886). A large, top-heavy mass rising up and twisting in space, it is compelling in purely abstract terms and thus an example of the "pure sculpture"—plastic expression independent of representation or narrative—that Rodin held as his highest aspiration. As such it points into the future, as we saw most recently in William Tucker's stunning show of new work at the Danese Corey Gallery in Chelsea earlier this fall, particularly *Chinese Horse* (2003). An eight-foot-tall, vigorously modeled bronze, it rises from a narrow support,

swells mightily, tilts back, cantilevers out, and then, as you walk around it, seems to heave and twist, evoking nothing so much as the strain of the human body moving against its own mass and the pull of gravity.

Otherwise, there is no theme to the installation, no logic to the selection of works nor explanation of why out of the museum's thirty Rodin sculptures—one of the best collections in the country—these ten are chosen. Worst of all is the location, in a gallery that forces visitors to shield their eyes from the glare of the sun while viewing the sculptures. Still, there's time to get it right. Rodin's bicentennial is just around the corner.

1 “The Kiss” opened at the Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, on February 1, 2017 and remains on view through December 30, 2018.

2 “Rodin at the Met” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on September 16, 2017 and remains on view through January 15, 2018.

3 “Rodin: 100 Years” opened at the Cleveland Museum of Art on September 1, 2017 and remains on view through May 13, 2018.

4 “Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition” was on view at the Grand Palais, Paris, from March 22 through July 31, 2017.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 36 Number 4, on page 24

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