



*Auguste*

**RODIN**

Best of

Rainer Maria Rilke  
**Auguste Rodin**

«Parkstone International Publishing»

2016

## **Rilke R.**

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Influenced by the masters of Antiquity, the genius of Michelangelo and Baroque sculpture, particularly of Bernini, Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) is one of the most renowned artists in history. Though Rodin is considered a founder of modern sculpture, he did not set out to critique past classical traditions. Many of his sculptures were criticised and considered controversial because of their sensuality or hyperrealist qualities. His most original works departed from traditional themes of mythology and allegory, and embraced the human body, celebrating individualism and physicality. This book uncovers the life and career of this highly acclaimed artist by exploring his most famous works of art, such as the Gates of Hell, The Thinker and the infamous The Kiss.

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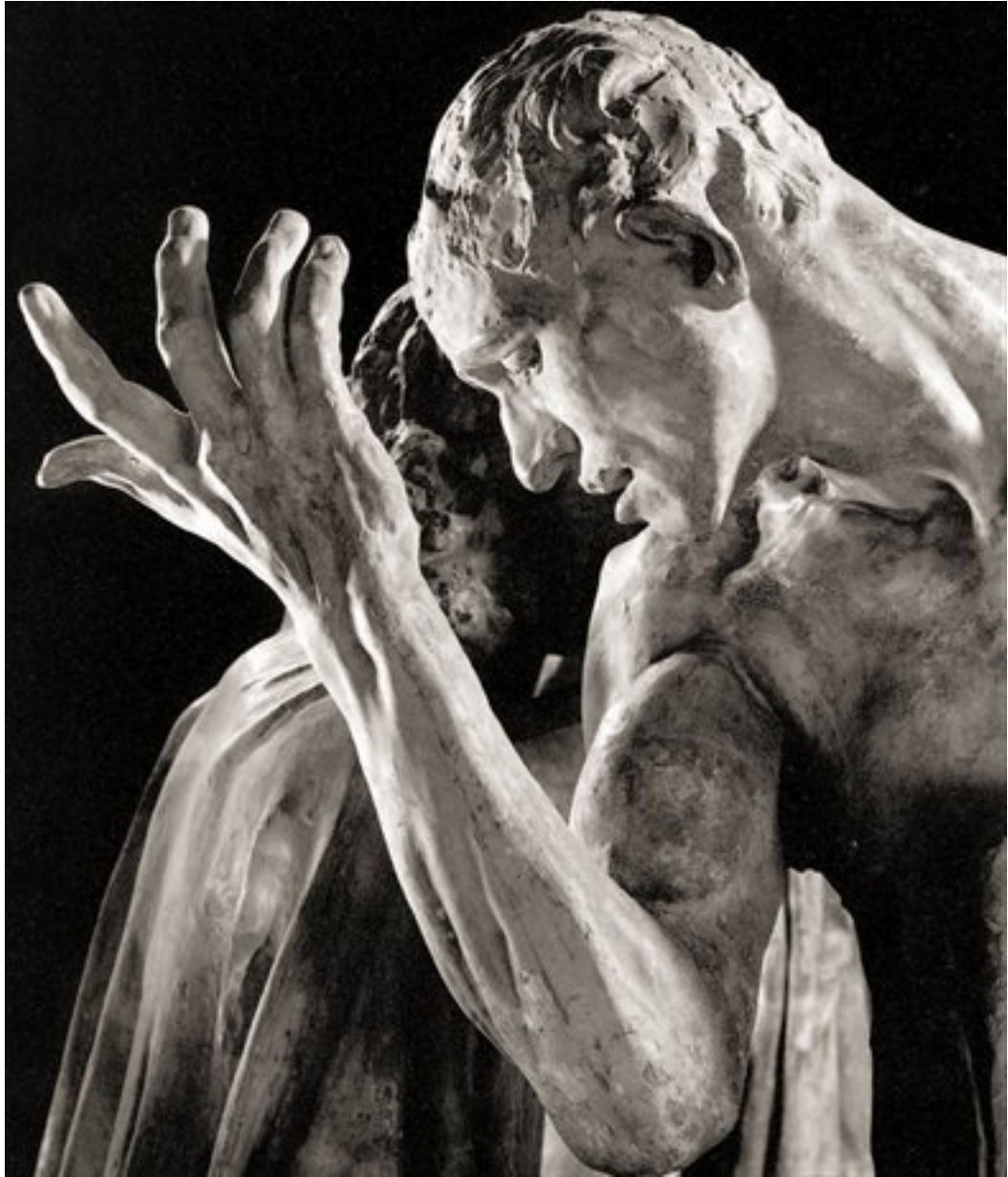
# Rainer Maria Rilke Auguste Rodin

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*The Monument for the Burghers of Calais*, detail of Pierre de Wissant, 1889.  
Plaster. Musée Rodin, Paris.

## The Poet's Tribute to the Great Sculptor

*"Writers work with words, sculptors with actions."*  
– **POMPONIIUS GAURICUS: DE SCULPTURA (circa 1504)**

*"The hero is he who is immovably centered."*  
– **RALPH WALDO EMERSON**

Rodin was solitary before he was famous. And fame, when it arrived, made him perhaps even more solitary. For in the end, fame is no more than the sum of all the misunderstandings that gather around a new name. There are many of these around Rodin, and clarifying them would be a long, arduous, and ultimately unnecessary task. They surround the name, but not the work, which far exceeds the resonance of the name, and which has become nameless, as a great plain is nameless, or a sea, which may bear a name in maps, in books, and among people, but which is in reality just vastness, movement, and depth.

The work of which we speak here has been growing for years. It grows every day like a forest, never losing an hour. Passing among its countless manifestations, we are overcome by the richness of discovery and invention, and we can't help but marvel at the pair of hands from which this world has grown. We remember how small human hands are, how quickly they tire and how little time is given to them to create. We long to see these hands, which have lived the lives of hundreds of hands, of a nation of hands that rose before dawn to brave the long path of this work. We wonder whose hands these are. Who is this man?

His life is one of those that resists being made into a story. This life began and proceeded, passing deep into a venerable age; it almost seems to us as if this life had passed hundreds of years ago. We know nothing of it. There must have been some kind of childhood, a childhood in poverty; dark, searching, uncertain. And perhaps this childhood still belongs to this life. After all, as Saint Augustine once said, "where can it have gone? It may yet have all its past hours, the hours of anticipation and of desolation, the hours of despair and the long hours of need."

This is a life that has lost nothing, that has forgotten nothing, a life that amasses even as it passes. Perhaps. In truth we know nothing of this life. We feel certain, however, that it must be so, for only a life like this could produce such richness and abundance.



*Rodin in his Studio.*  
Photograph.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





*The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917.  
Plaster, 600 × 380 × 97.5 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Third maquette for *The Gates of Hell*, 1880.

Plaster, 109.8 × 73.7 × 28.5 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

Only a life in which everything is present and alive, in which nothing is lost to the past, can remain young and strong, and rise again and again to create great works. The time may come when this life will have a story, a narrative with burdens, episodes, and details. They will all be invented. Someone will tell of a child who often forgot to eat because it seemed more important to carve things in wood with a dull knife. They will find some encounter in the boy's early days that seemed to promise future greatness, one of those retrospective prophecies that are so common and touching. It may well be the words a monk is said to have spoken to the young Michel Colombe almost five hundred years ago:

“Work, little one, look all you can, the steeple of Saint Pol, and the beautiful works of the Compagnons, look, love God and you will be grace of grand things.”

And the grace of great things shall be given to you. Perhaps intuition spoke to the young man at one of the crossroads in his early days, and in infinitely more melodious tones than would have come from the mouth of a monk. For it was just this that he was after: the grace of great things. There was the Louvre with its many luminous objects of antiquity, evoking southerly skies and the nearness of the sea. And behind it rose heavy things of stone, traces of inconceivable cultures enduring into epochs still to come. This stone was asleep, and one had the sense that it would awake at a kind of Last Judgment.



Project for *The Gates of Hell*, c. 1880.

Graphite touched up with pen and ink (sketch for the composition), 30.5 × 15.2 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.





*The Gates of Hell* (detail), 1880–1917.

Bronze.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



*The Gates of Hell* (detail), 1880–1917.

Bronze.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



*The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917.

Bronze, 635 × 400 × 85 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

There was stone that seemed in no way mortal, and other stone that seemed in motion, gestures that remained entirely fresh, as if they were preserved here only to be given one day to a passing child. And this vitality was not limited to the famous works, to those visible to all. The unseen, small, nameless, and seemingly superfluous works were no less filled with this deep inner force, with this rich and astonishing disquiet of life. Even the stillness, where there was stillness, consisted of hundreds of motive moments held in equilibrium. There were small figures, especially animals, moving, stretching, or crouching, and even when a bird sat still, one knew very well that it was a bird, for the sky issued forth and surrounded it, a breadth was apparent in the smallest folds of its wings, which could spread to astonishing size.

And the same thing was true of the animals that stood and sat on the cathedrals, or crouched beneath the consoles, bent and bowed and too inert to bear weight. There were dogs and squirrels, sparrows and lizards, turtles, rats, and snakes. At least one of every kind.

These creatures appeared to have been captured out in the forests and on the paths, as if the strain of living among shoots, flowers, and leaves of stone had transformed them slowly into what they were now and would always remain. But there were also animals that were born into this world of stone, without any memory of another existence. They had always been entirely at home in this upright, towering, precipitous world. Skeletons arched up among these fanatically lean creatures. Their mouths opened wide with cries of the deaf, for the nearby bells had destroyed their hearing. Some crouched like birds upon the balustrades, as if they were passing through and simply wanted to rest for a few centuries, staring down at the growing city. Others, descended from dogs, thrust horizontally from the edge of the spouting into the air, prepared to spit water from swollen maws. All these creatures had adapted and changed, but they lost none of their vitality in the process. To the contrary, they lived more vigorously and more violently, they lived eternally the fervent and impetuous life of the time that had given rise to them.

Seeing this picture, one sensed that these creatures had not resulted from a whim, or from a merely playful attempt to find new, unusual forms. They were born of necessity. Fearful of the invisible judgment of a severe faith, their creators had sought refuge in these visible forms, fleeing from uncertainty to this materialization. Still seeking the face of God, these artists no longer attempted to demonstrate their piety by creating in his vastly distant image, but rather by bringing all their fear and poverty into his house, by placing all their modesty and humble gestures in his hands and upon his heart. This was better than painting, for painting too was an illusion, a beautiful and cunning deception. They longed for something more significant, something simpler. And so the strange sculpture of cathedrals came about, this sacred procession of the beasts of burden.

When we look back from the sculpture of the Middle Ages to antiquity, and from there to the beginnings of time, does it not seem as if the human soul has always longed, and particularly at turning points both light and distressing, for an art that gives more than word and picture, more than parables and appearance; for the simple realization of its desires or anxieties in things? The last great age for sculpture was the Renaissance. It was a time when life was undergoing renewal, when the mysterious face of mankind was discovered anew; a time when great gestures were possible.





*The Burghers of Calais*, 1889.  
Plaster, 217 × 255 × 177 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Jamb of the *Gates of Hell*, c. 1885.

Clay modelling.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

And now? Is it possible that another age demanding this form of expression had arrived, an age demanding a strong and perceptive interpretation of that which defied articulation, of that which was confused and enigmatic? The arts did seem to be undergoing a kind of renewal, animated by great excitement and expectation. Perhaps it was just this art, this sculpture that still lingers in the shadows of its great past, which was called on to discover what the others were longing and groping for? Surely this art could come to the aid of an age tormented by conflicts that were almost all invisible. Its language was the body, but when had this body last been seen? It was buried under layer upon layer of clothes, renewed perpetually by the latest styles. But beneath this protective crust, the ripening soul was changing the body, even as it was working breathlessly on the human face. The body has been transformed. If we were to uncover it now; it would probably have a thousand expressions for everything nameless and new that had come into being in the meantime, for those old secrets that emerge from the unconscious like strange river gods, raising their dripping

heads from the rush of blood. This body would be no less beautiful than that of antiquity. Indeed, it could only be even more beautiful. For life has held it in its hands two millennia longer, working on it, listening to it, and hammering at it day and night. Painters dreamed of this body, they adorned it with light and infused it with twilight. They approached it with tenderness and charms of every kind, they stroked it like the petal of a flower and let themselves be carried along in it like a wave. But sculpture, to which the body belonged, did not know it yet.

Here was a task great as the world. And the man to whom it was given was unknown, his hands searching blindly for bread. He was completely alone, and if he had been a proper dreamer, he would have dreamed deeply and beautifully, he would have dreamed something no one would understand, one of those endlessly long dreams in which life passes like a day. But this young man, who was working in a factory in Sèvres, France at the time, was a dreamer whose dream got into his hands, and he began immediately with its realization. He had a sense for how to begin; a calmness within showed him the way of wisdom. His deep harmony with nature was evident already at this stage, the harmony described so well by the poet Georges Rodenbach, who calls Rodin simply a force of nature.

In fact, Rodin was possessed of a patience so deep it almost makes him anonymous; a quiet, considered serenity reminiscent of the patience and goodness of nature, which begins with next to nothing only to traverse the long path to abundance in silent solemnity. In the same way, Rodin was not presumptuous enough to create trees. He began with the seed, underground as it were. And this seed grew downward, sinking its roots into the earth, anchoring itself before the first small shoot began to rise up. This took time and then more time. And when the few friends around him pushed and prodded, Rodin would say, "One must never hurry."

Then came the Franco-Prussian war and Rodin went to Brussels, where he worked on what the days brought to him. He designed some figures for private houses and several of the groups on the stock exchange building, and then he created the four large figures on the corners of the monument to Mayor Loos in the Parc d'Anvers. He carried out these commissions conscientiously, without permitting any expression of his growing individuality. His own development proceeded alongside this work, relegated to breaks and evenings, and sustained primarily in the solitary stillness of the nights. He endured this division of his energy for years. He possessed the strength of those upon whom some great work is waiting, the silent endurance of those the world needs.

While he was working on the stock exchange in Brussels, he must have felt that there were no longer buildings which were up to bearing works of stone like the cathedrals had been, those great magnets of the sculpture of the past. Works of sculpture now stood alone, just as paintings stood alone; but unlike pictures created on easels, a sculpture did not require a wall. It didn't even require a roof. It was simply a thing that could stand on its own, and it was good to provide it with the essence of a thing, which one could walk around and view from all sides. And yet it had to be distinguished somehow from the other things, the ordinary things, which anyone could grasp. It had to become somehow untouchable, sacrosanct, removed from the influence of chance and time, in the context of which it stands solitary and luminous, like the face of a visionary. It required a secure place of its own, selected in the most mindful way, for it must be made part of the subtle permanence of space and its great laws. It must be fit into the air that surrounds it like a niche, providing it with security and stability, and with a sublimity that comes from its simple existence, not from its significance.

Rodin knew well that the most essential element of this work was a thorough understanding of the human body. He explored its surface, searching slowly, until a hand stretched out to meet him, and the form of this outward gesture both determined and was expressive of forces within the body. The further he went on this distant path, the more chance receded, and one law led to another. And in the end this surface became the subject of his study. It consisted of infinite encounters between things and light, and it quickly became clear that each of these encounters was different

and all were remarkable. At one point the light seemed to be absorbed, at another light the things seemed to greet each other cautiously, and then again the two would pass like strangers. There were encounters that seemed endless, and others in which nothing seemed to happen, but there was never one without life and movement.

It was then that Rodin discovered the fundamental element of his art and, as it were, the germ of his world. This was the plane – the variously large and accentuated, but always exactly determined plane – from which everything would be made. From this moment on, the plane was the material of his art, the source of all his efforts, vigilance, and passion. His art was not based on a great idea, but rather on the strength of a humble, conscientious realization, on something attainable, on ability. There was no arrogance in him. He devoted himself to this unassuming and difficult beauty, to that which he could survey, summon, and judge. The rest, the greatness, would have to come only when everything was finished, just as animals come down to drink when the night is full and there are no longer strange things in the forest.



*The Gates of Hell* (detail), 1880–1917.  
Bronze.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



*The Gates of Hell* (detail), 1880–1917.

Bronze.

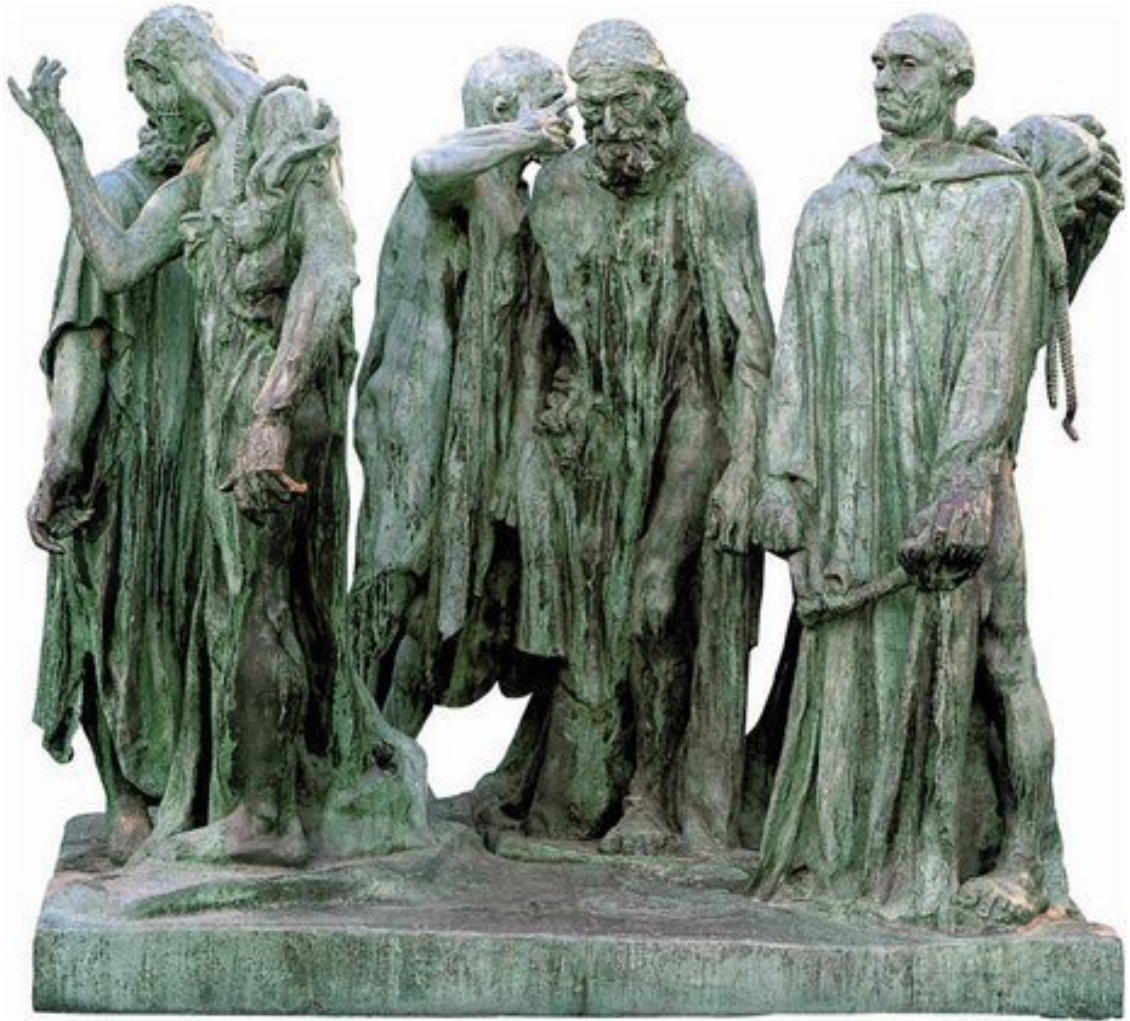
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Rodin's most distinctive work began with this discovery. It was only then that traditional notions of sculpture became worthless for him. There was no longer any pose, group, or composition. Now there was only an endless variety of living planes, there was only life and the means of expression he would find to take him to its source. Now it became a matter of mastering life in all its fullness. Rodin seized upon life as he saw it all around him. He observed it, cleaved to it, and laid hold of its most seemingly minor manifestations. He watched for it at moments of transition and hesitation, he overtook it in flight, and everywhere he found it equally great, equally powerful and enthralling. No part of the body was insignificant or trivial, for even the smallest of them was alive.



Life, which appeared on faces with the clarity of a dial, easily read and full of signs of the times, was greater and more diffuse in bodies, more mysterious and eternal. Here there was no deception. Here indifference appeared as such, and pride was simply pride. Stepping back from the stage provided by the face, the body removed its mask and revealed itself as it really was behind the curtains of costumes. It was here that he found the spirit of his age, just as he had discovered the spirit of the Middle Ages in its cathedrals: gathered around a mysterious darkness, held together by an organism, adapting to it and in its service. Human beings had become temples, and there were tens of thousands of these temples, none of them identical and all very much alive. And the most important thing was to demonstrate that they were all of one God.

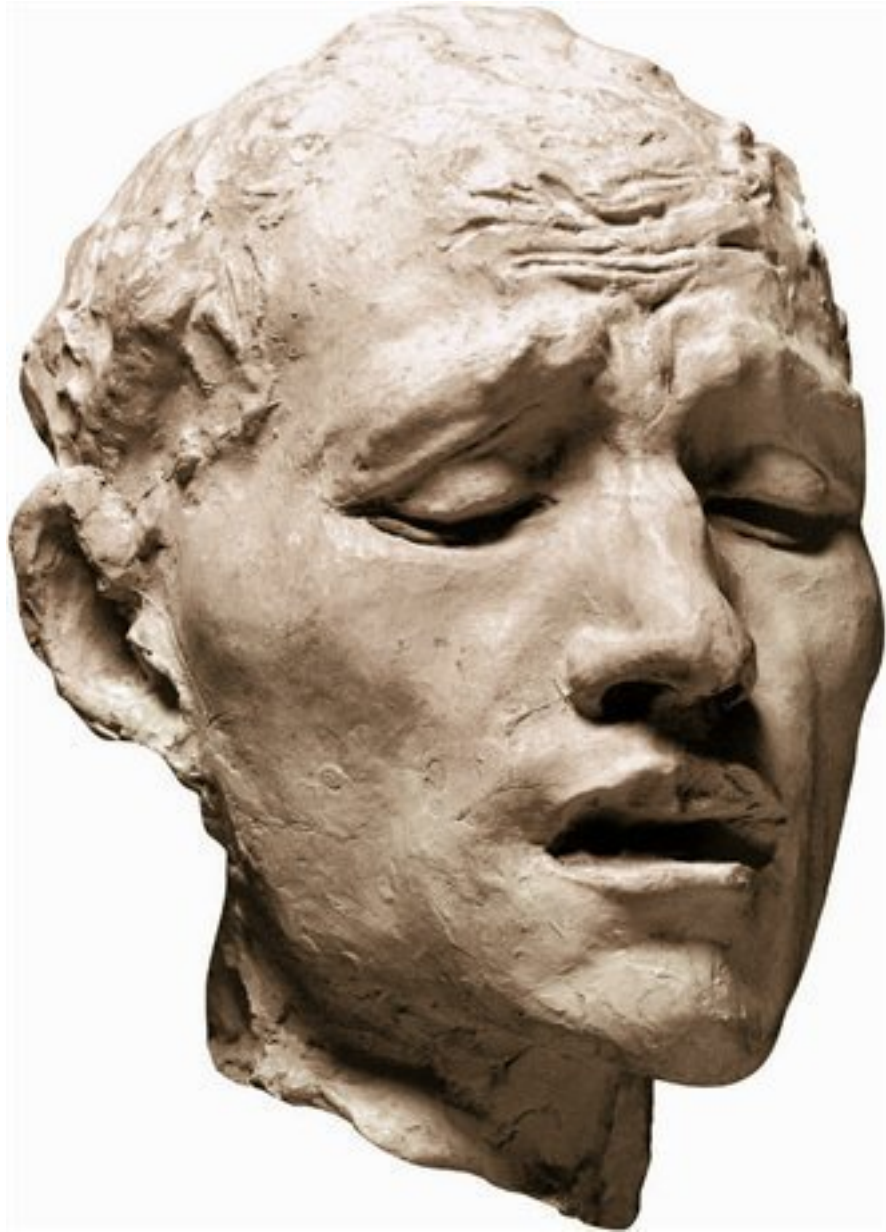
Rodin followed the paths of this life year after year, a humble pilgrim who never stopped thinking of himself as a beginner. No one knew of his travails; he had few friends and even fewer he could trust. Sheltered behind the efforts that sustained him, the work continued to grow, awaiting its time. He read widely. He was often to be seen on the streets of Brussels reading a book, yet we can't help but wonder if these books were but a pretext for a deep absorption in himself, in the unfathomable task before him. As with all who are called to action, this sense of the enormity of the work ahead provided incentive, heightening and concentrating his powers. And when doubt and uncertainty appeared, when impatience with that which was coming into being threatened, when the fear of an early death crept in, or the hardships of daily existence, they were always met by a quiet, resolute resistance, by defiance, strength, and confidence, by all the flags that would be unfurled in the victory yet to come. Perhaps the past took his side in those hours; the voice of the cathedrals, which he never stopped listening to. From books, too, came considerable support. Reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* for the first time was a great revelation. He saw the suffering bodies of another generation. He saw, across the span of countless days, a century stripped of its clothes, and he recognized the poet's great and unforgettable judgment on his age. They were images that only confirmed his own sensibility, for when he read of the weeping feet of Nicholas the Third, he already knew that feet could weep; indeed, he knew that there is a kind of weeping that encompasses the whole body, and that tears can come from all the pores.



*The Monument to the Burghers of Calais*, 1889.  
Bronze, 217 × 255 × 177 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Burgher of Calais: Andrieus d'Andres*, figure from the second model, 1885.  
Bronze, 61.5 × 22 × 46 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Head of Pierre de Wissant, c. 1885–1886 (?).*

Terracotta, 28.6 × 20 × 22 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Jean de Fiennes, dressed*, 1885–1886.  
Bronze, 208.3 × 121.9 × 96.5 cm.  
Musé Rodin, Paris.



*Burgher of Calais: Eustache de Saint Pierre (study).*  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Burgher of Calais: Pierre de Wissant*, figure from the second model, 1985.  
Bronze, 70 × 29 × 29 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.

From Dante he came to Baudelaire. This was no tribunal of judgment, no poet ascending on the hand of a shadow to heaven. Here, rather, was a simple human being, a mere mortal who suffered like everyone, lifting his voice high above the din, as if to save us all from destruction. And there were sections of these lyrics that stood out from the rest, passages that seemed to be formed more than written, words and groups of words that were molded in the hot hands of the poet, lines like reliefs to the touch, and sonnets like columns with twisted capitals, bearing the weight of troubled thoughts. He felt dimly that the abrupt ruptures of this art ran up against the beginnings of another art, and that it longed for this other art. He came to think of Baudelaire as a predecessor, an artist who refused to be led astray by faces but sought bodies instead, in which life was greater, more gruesome and more restless.

From this time forward, these two poets were always close to him. His thoughts reached out beyond them but always returned. In that seminal, formative period of his art, when the life he

was learning was still nameless and without significance, Rodin's thoughts roamed in the books of these poets, and he found in them a past. Later he would draw again on this rich material as a source for his own creative art. Figures would arise, weary and entirely real, like memories from his own life, making their way into his work as if they were coming home.

Finally, after years of solitary work, he surfaced with one of his works. It was a question put to the public, and the public responded negatively. So Rodin withdrew within himself for another thirteen years. These were the years in which, still toiling in obscurity, he developed into a master, gaining complete command of his medium, constantly working, thinking, and experimenting, uninfluenced by his time, which took no notice of him. Perhaps it was just this – that his whole development had proceeded in such undisturbed serenity that would give him such tremendous confidence later, when he was attacked, and when his work became the object of no small criticism. When others began to doubt him, he no longer had any doubt in himself. All that was behind him. His fate no longer depended on the recognition and acclaim of the public; it was already decided by the time people tried to annihilate him with hostility and disdain. Rodin was immune to the voices of the outside world in the time of his becoming. There was no praise that could have led him astray, no censure that might have confused him. Like Parsifal, his work grew in purity, alone with itself and with great, eternal nature. His work alone spoke to him. It spoke to him in the morning when he awoke, and reverberated like an instrument in his hands late into the evening. His work was invincible because it came into the world mature. It no longer appeared as something that was coming into being and thus seeking justification; rather, it was as if reality had emerged, and one simply had to reckon with it. Like a king who learns of plans for a city to be built in his realm, considers whether to grant the privilege, hesitates, and then finally decides to check the prospective site only to discover that the city is already complete, its walls, towers, and gates standing as if for eternity, people came when they were finally summoned, and found Rodin's work complete.



*Balzac in Dominican Robe*, 1891–1892.

Plaster, 108 × 53.7 × 38.3 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Monument to Balzac*, 1898.  
Bronze, 270 × 120 × 128 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Two works mark this period of growing maturity. At the beginning stands the head of *The Man with the Broken Nose*, at the end the figure Rodin called *First Man*. *The Man with the Broken Nose* was rejected by the Salon in 1864. This is not difficult to imagine, for one can't help but feel that with this work, entirely whole and sure as it was, Rodin had already reached full maturity. With the forthrightness of a great confession, it violated the precepts of academic beauty that were still predominant at the time. Rodin had given the wild gesture and widemouthed scream to his *Goddess of Revolt* on the triumphal arch in the Place de l'Etoile in vain; Barye, too, had created his graceful animals in vain; and Carpeaux's *Dance* was greeted with scorn, until familiarity eventually made it impossible to see it for what it was. Nothing had changed. In those days sculpture was still models, poses, and allegory – the simple, facile, and leisurely work that consists essentially of more or less accomplished variations on a few sanctioned gestures. In this environment the head of *The Man with the Broken Nose* almost surely would have caused a storm much like the one that broke only

when Rodin's later works appeared. But it seems more likely that, because it was the work of an unknown artist, it was rejected summarily.

We feel what moved Rodin to form this head, which is that of an aging, ugly man, whose broken nose only heightens the pained expression on his face. The fullness of life is gathered in these features, and there are absolutely no symmetrical planes on the face. Nothing is repeated, no spot remains empty, mute, or neutral. Life had not simply touched this face, it had shaped it through and through, as if an inexorable hand had thrust it into destiny and held it there, in the rush and swirl of cleansing waters. Holding this mask and turning it slowly, one can't help but be astonished by the constantly changing profiles, none of which are in any way uncertain, incidental, or indefinite. On this head there is not a single line, angle, or contour that Rodin hadn't seen and intended. We get the sense that some of these furrows appeared earlier and others later, that years – difficult years – lay between the gashes across the features. We know that some of the marks on this face were etched slowly, with great hesitation, and that others were traced lightly at first, only to be inscribed more deeply by habit or a recurring thought. And we recognize those sharp incisions that can only have resulted from a single night, hacked as if by the beak of a bird in the weary brow of one starved for sleep. The life emanating from this work is so weighty and nameless, and we struggle to remember that all this appears in the shape of a face.

Placing the mask before us, it is as if we were standing on an enormous tower, looking down on an uneven landscape, surveying the winding paths crossed by countless people over the years. Picking it up again, we hold a thing that can only be called beautiful on account of its perfection. But its beauty is not solely a result of the incomparable meticulousness with which it was crafted. It comes, rather, from the sense of proportion, the balance of the living planes, and from an understanding of the fact that all these moments of ferment come to rest within the thing itself. And while one can't help but be moved by the protean pain of this face, one also has the unmistakable sense that it utters no accusation. It makes no appeal to the world. It seems to carry its own justice within, the reconciliation of all its contradictions, and a patience sufficient for the weight of its burden.





*Balzac, Nude Study C*, 1892–1893.  
Bronze, 127 × 56 × 62.2 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Balzac, Monumental Head, 1897.*  
Enameled terracotta, 42.2 × 44.6 × 38.2 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Balzac's Dressing Gown*, c. 1895  
Plastered cloth, 148 × 57.5 × 42 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Meudon.

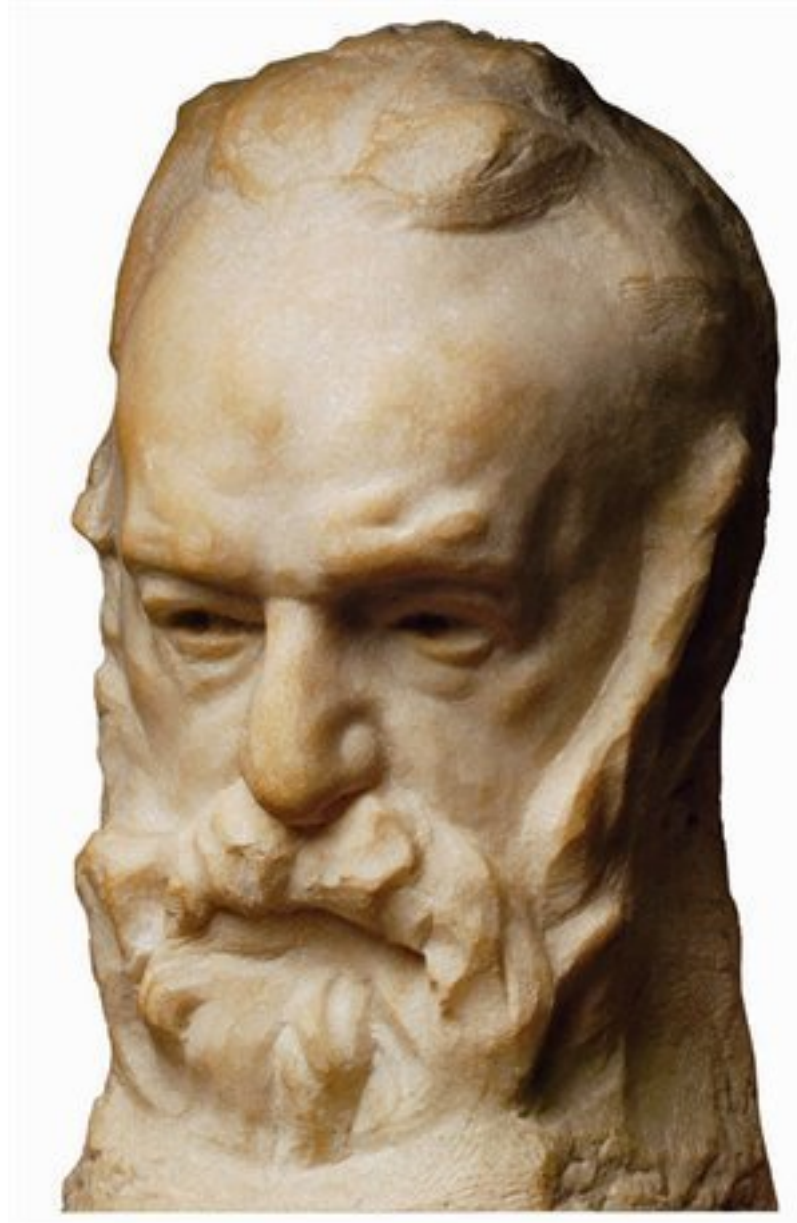


*Monument to Victor Hugo* (first draft, sketch of the second maquette), 1890.  
Bronze, 38.2 × 29 × 36 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Monument to Victor Hugo*, 1901.  
Plaster, 155 × 254 × 110 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Bust of Victor Hugo*, 1883.  
Marble, 47 × 21 × 20 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Victor Hugo*, 1883.  
Bronze, 48 × 28 × 31 cm.  
Musée des beaux-arts, Lyon.

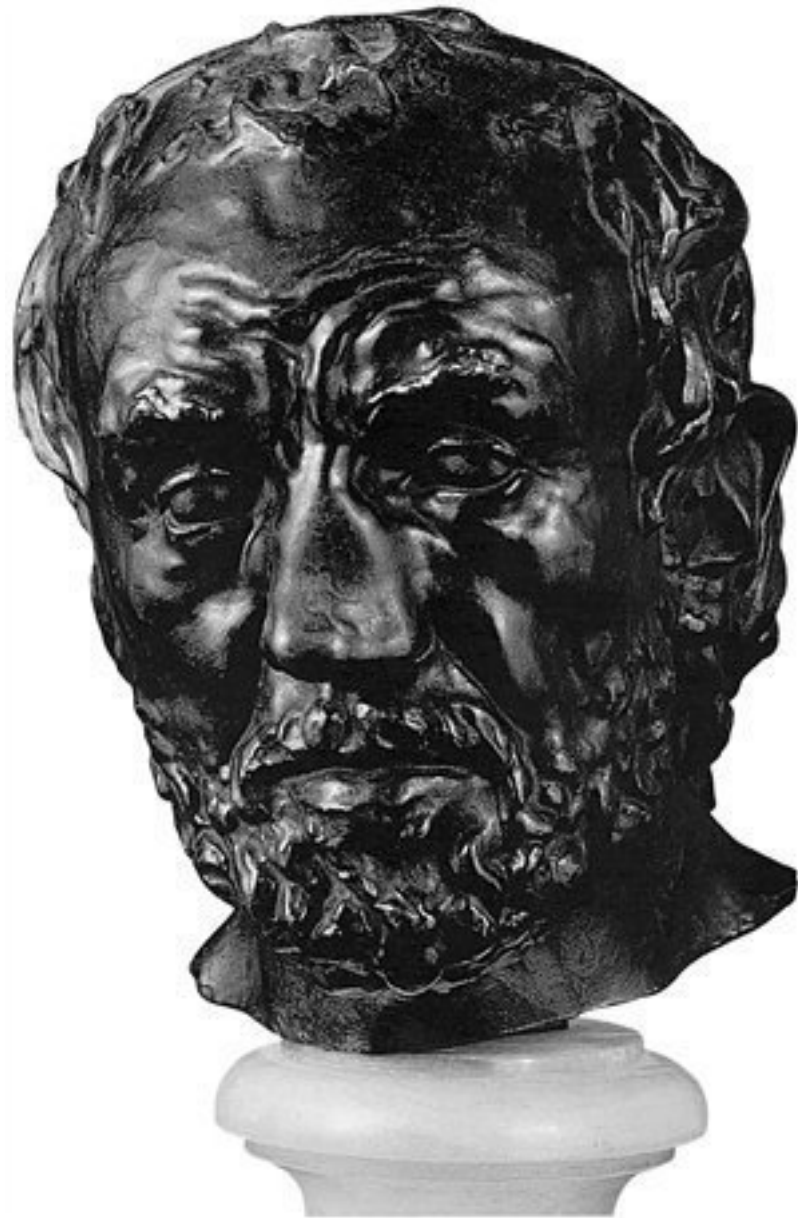
A man sat motionless before Rodin when he created this mask, his expression calm and unmoved. But it was the countenance of a living person, and as he studied this face it became clear that it was full of motion, full of disquiet and crashing waves. There was movement in the course of the lines and in the grade of the planes. The shadows played as if in sleep, and light passed softly over the brow: There was, in short, no peace, not even in death. For even in decline, which is also motion, death was subordinate to life. There was always motion in nature, and art that wished to present a conscientious and faithful interpretation of nature could not idealize a motionlessness that exists nowhere.

In reality there was no such ideal in antiquity. We have only to think of *Nike*. This sculpture gives us more than the motion of a lovely young woman going to meet her lover; it is also an eternal representation of the wind of Greece, of its breadth and glory. Even the stones of ancient cultures were not still. The restlessness of living surfaces was inscribed in the restrained, hieratic gestures of ancient cults, like water within the walls of a vessel. Currents flowed through gods at rest, and those who stood seemed to embody motion, like a fountain rising from the stone and then falling back again, covering it with innumerable waves. Motion was never at odds with the spirit of sculpture (which means simply the essence of things); it was only motion that remained incomplete, motion that was not in balance with other forces, motion that extended beyond the boundaries of the thing. Works of sculpture resemble those ancient cities where life was passed entirely within the city walls: the people did not lack for air and their gestures never became cramped. But nothing went outside the limits of the circle enclosing them. There was no sense of what was beyond, nothing to indicate a life beyond the gates, and no sense of expectation opening without.

No matter how great the motion in a work of sculpture may be, and whether it comes from infinite expanses or the depths of the heavens, it must always return to itself the great circle of solitude in which the art object passes its days must be closed. This was the unwritten law that lived in the sculpture of the past, and Rodin understood it. This distinguishing characteristic of things – this complete self-absorption – was what gave sculpture its serenity; it could neither demand nor expect anything from outside itself, and it could refer to nothing and see nothing that was not within itself. Its surroundings had to be found within it. It was the sculptor Leonardo who gave this look of unapproachability to the *Mona Lisa*, this motion inward, this gaze one cannot meet. His *Francesco Sforza* probably had the same quality, this expression of motion in return, like a proud ambassador who returns to his country after the fulfillment of some great purpose.

In the long years that passed between the mask of *The Man with the Broken Nose* and the figure of *First Man*, Rodin developed in many quiet ways. New associations linked him more closely with the tradition of his art. This past and its greatness, which so many before him had felt to be a burden, lent wings to Rodin, carrying him aloft. For when he sensed confirmation in those years, affirmation of what he wanted and was searching for, it came from the art of antiquity and from the furrowed darkness of cathedrals. Living human beings didn't speak to him in those years. Stones spoke.

If the *Man with the Broken Nose* had demonstrated Rodin's profound understanding of the human face, the *First Man* manifested his complete mastery of the body. "*Souverain tailleur d'ymaiges*" (Soverign tailor of images) – that title used selflessly by the masters of the Middle Ages to appraise one another's work – now came to him. Life was not simply great all over this life-size nude figure, it was endowed everywhere with the same sublimity of expression. What appeared on the face – the pain of a difficult awakening along with the longing for this hardship – was written as well on the smallest feature of its body. Every part was a mouth giving voice to it in some way. The most exacting eye could not discover any part of this figure that could be identified as less alive, less determined and clear. It was as if strength surged up from the depths of the earth to fill the veins of this man. He was like the silhouette of a tree facing spring storms, fearful because the fruit and fullness of its summer no longer lives in the roots, but rather is rising slowly, up through the trunk buffeted by great winds.



*The Man with the Broken Nose*, 1864.  
Bronze, 26 × 18 × 23 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





*The Thinker*, 1879–1880.

Plaster.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



*The Thinker*, 1881.  
Bronze, 71.5 × 40 × 58 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*The Age of Bronze*, 1875–1876.  
Bronze, 175.3 × 67.5 × 52.9 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.

*The Age of Bronze* is significant in another sense as well. It marks the birth of gesture in the work of Rodin. This gesture, which would grow and develop with such force and proportion, came forth here like the waters of a spring, running down softly over the body. It awoke in the darkness of earliest times, and seems, as it grows, to run through the breadth of this work as it does through the ages, and to pass far beyond to those who will come. It appears tentatively in the raised arms, arms so heavy that one of the hands comes to rest on the crown of the head. But this hand is not asleep; it is gathering strength. High up on the solitary peak of the brain, it prepares itself for work – for the work of centuries, which has no limit or end. And in the right foot the first step waits. We might describe this gesture as one of the repose enclosed in a hard bud.

Embers of thoughts and a storm of the will: it opens and John comes out, with those eloquent, agitated arms, and the great bearing of one who feels another coming up from behind. The body of this man is no longer untested: the deserts have scorched him, hunger has racked him, and thirst

has sapped his strength. He has come through it all and is hardened. His lean, ascetic body is like a wooden handle, holding the wide fork of his stride. He walks. He walks as if the whole wide world were in him, as if he were apportioning it as he walks. He walks. His arms speak of this walking, and his fingers stretch out, a sign of his stride in the air. This is the first walker in Rodin's work, but many more would follow.

There are *The Burghers of Calais* (pp. 17, 25, 28, 29) setting out on their arduous journey, and all his walkers seem to prepare the way for the great challenging stride of *Balzac*. But the gestures of standing are developed further as well. The figures withdraw within themselves, curling up like burning paper, growing stronger, more concentrated and vital. Exemplary of this is the figure of *Eve*, which was originally intended to stand above *The Gates of Hell* (pp. 9, 14). Her head is sunk deep in the darkness of her arms, which are folded across her chest as if she were freezing. The back is rounded, the neck almost horizontal, and she leans forward as if to listen to her own body, in which a strange future is beginning to stir. It is almost as if the weight of the future burdens this woman's senses, drawing her down from the abstractness of life and into the deep humble service of motherhood.

Rodin returns again and again in his nude figures to this turn inward, to this intense listening to one's own depths. We see it in the extraordinary figure he called *Meditation* (bronze), and in the unforgettable the *Inner Voice* (plaster), the softest voice of Victor Hugo's songs, which is almost concealed by the voice of anger in the monument to the poet. Never before had the human body been so concentrated around its interior, so shaped by its own soul and yet restrained by the elastic power of its blood. And the way the neck rises ever so slightly, stretching to hold the listening head above the distant rush of life, is so impressive and deeply felt that one has a difficult time remembering a gesture as moving or expressive. The arms are noticeably missing. In this case Rodin must have felt them to be too easy a solution to his problem, something not belonging to a body that wished to remain shrouded in itself, without any help from outside.

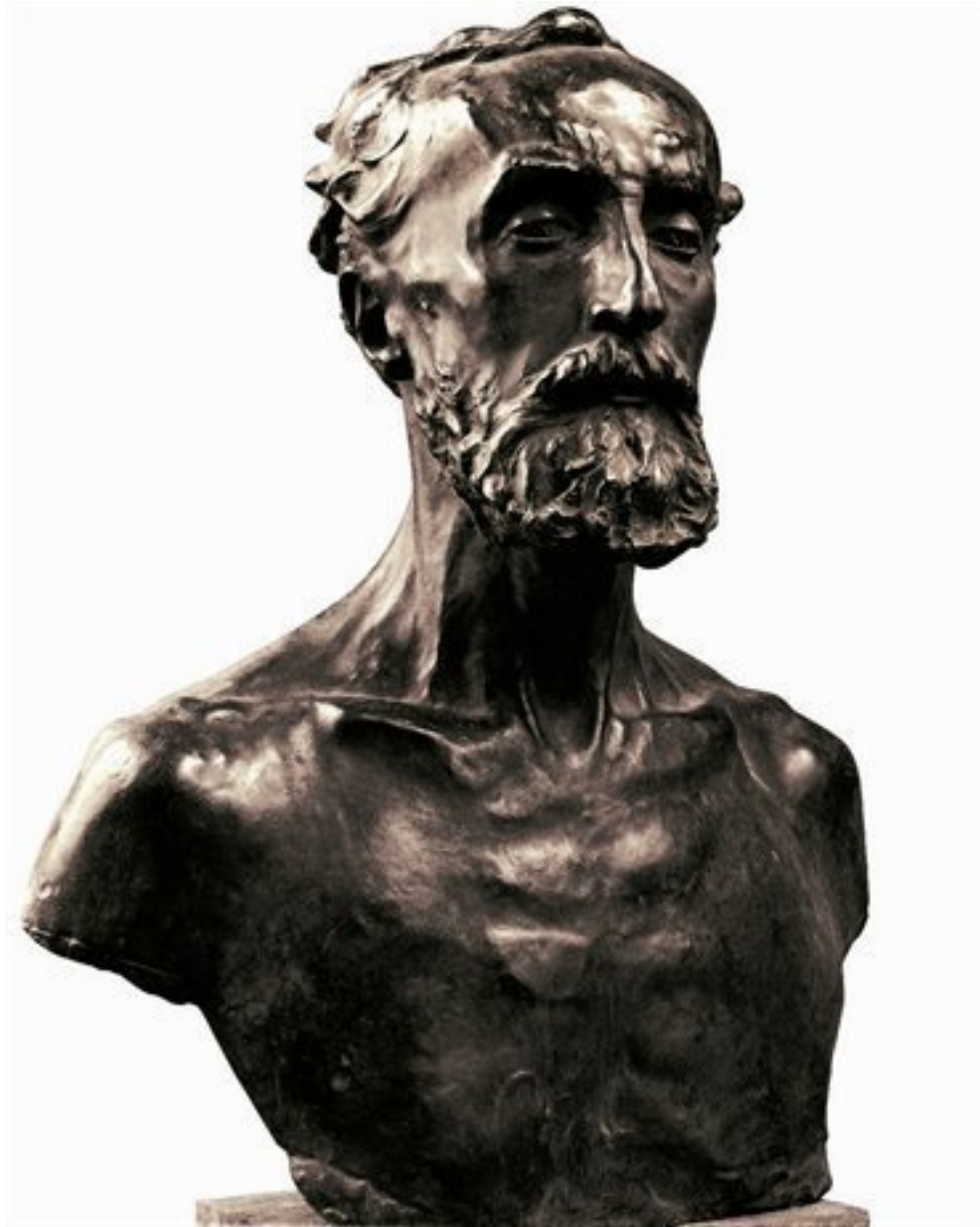


*The Three Shades*, 1880.  
Bronze, 96.6 × 92 × 54.1 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Jules-Bastien Lepage, 1887.*  
Plaster, 176 × 87.5 × 88 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.



*Bust of the Sculptor Jules Dalou, 1883.*

Bronze, 52.2 × 42.9 × 26.7 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Georges Clemenceau*, 1911.  
Bronze, 50 × 32 × 25 cm.  
Musée Rodin, Paris.

One thinks of how Duse, left painfully alone in one of D'Annunzio's plays, tried to embrace without arms and to hold without hands. This scene, in which her body learned a caress that extended far beyond itself, belongs to the unforgettable moments of her acting career. It conveyed the sense that arms are superfluous, merely decorative effects common among the rich and excessive, which one could cast off in order to be completely poor. At that moment one did not have the sense that she had forfeited something important; rather, she was like someone who has given her cup away in order to drink from the stream, like someone who is naked and still a bit awkward with the depth of the revelation.



*Saint John the Baptist*, 1880.

Bronze.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

The same thing is true of Rodin's armless statues: nothing essential is missing. Standing before them, one has the sense of a profound wholeness, a completeness that allows for no addition. The notion that they are somehow unfinished does not result from simple observation, but rather from tedious consideration, from the petty pedantry dictating that arms belong to a body, and thus that a body without arms can never be whole. Initially, people objected to the way the Impressionists cut trees off at the edges of paintings, but we quickly adjusted to that. We learned – at least in the world of painting – to see and believe that an artistic whole doesn't necessarily coincide with the ordinary whole-thing, and that, apart from their agreement, new unities come about, new associations and relations, new equilibriums. It is no different in sculpture. The artist's task consists of making one thing of many, and a world from the smallest part of a thing. In Rodin's work there

are hands, independent little hands, which are alive without belonging to any single body. There are hands that rise up, irritable and angry, and hands whose five bristling fingers seem to bark like the five false heads of Cerberus. There are hands that walk, hands that sleep and hands that wake; criminal hands weighted with the past, and hands that are tired and want nothing more, hands that lie down in a corner like sick animals who know no one can help them. But then hands are a complicated organism, a delta in which life from the most distant sources flows together, surging into the great current of action. Hands have stories; they even have their own culture and their own particular beauty. We grant them the right to have their own development, their own wishes, feelings, moods, and occupations. Rodin knows by way of the training he took upon himself that the body consists solely of scenes of life, a life that can become great and individual in any place, and he has the power to provide any part of this broad, variegated plane with the autonomy and richness of a whole. Just as the human body is a whole for Rodin only insofar as all its limbs and powers respond to one common (inner or outer) movement, so do the parts of various bodies come together of inner necessity to make up a single organism. A hand lying on the shoulder or thigh of another body no longer belongs completely to the one it came from: a new thing arises out of it and the object it touches or grasps, a thing that has no name and belongs to no one, and it is this new thing, which has its own definite boundaries, that matters from that point on.



*Saint John the Baptist*, 1880.

Bronze.

Musée Rodin, Paris.





*Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, 1882.*

Terracotta, 48 × 45 × 34 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

This vision provides the basis for the grouping of figures in Rodin; from it comes that unprecedented interconnectedness of the figures, that inseparability of the forms, that not letting go, not at any price. He doesn't set out to create figures, and there are no models to be shaped and put together. He begins with places where the contact is strongest, and these are the high points of the work. He sets in there, where something new is coming about, dedicating the vast knowledge of his craft to the mysterious appearances that accompany the becoming of a new thing. He works by the light of flashes that occur at these points, seeing only those parts of the whole body that are illuminated in the process. The magic of that great pairing of a young woman and a man called *The Kiss* (pp. 85, 86) lies in this wise and eminently fair distribution of life. In observing this work, one almost can sense that waves pass into the bodies from the various points of contact on the surface,



showers of beauty, intuition, and power. It is this that accounts for how we feel we can see the ecstasy of this kiss in every part of these bodies; it is like a rising sun, casting its light everywhere. But there is another kiss that is even more wonderful – the kiss around which the piece called *The Eternal Idol* (pp. 73, 74) rises like walls around a garden. One of the copies of this marble piece belonged to Eugène Carrière.

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