

Rodin

Mega Square

Rainer Maria Rilke
Rodin

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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 Rodin

“Nothing can grow under big trees.”
Constantin Brancusi

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Biography



1840: Birth of Auguste Rodin in Paris on November 12th.

1850: Rodin starts to draw.

1854: He enters into a special school for drawing and mathematics, called “La Petite École”, and takes classes from Paul Émile Lecoq de Boisbaudran and the painter Jean-Hilaire Belloc.

1855: Rodin discovers sculpture.

1857: He leaves “La Petite École” and attempts to enter into the School of Fine Arts, but is rejected three times.

1862: Death of his sister Maria. Grief stricken by her death, Rodin goes to the Très-Saint-Sacrement, a Catholic Order, where he stays until 1863.

1864: Beginning of the collaboration with Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse.

1872: End of his collaboration with Carrier-Belleuse.

1873: He enters into a contract with Belgian sculptor Antoine-Joseph van Rasbourgh.

1875: Goes to Italy where he sees the works of Michelangelo.

1877: He exhibits *The Age of Bronze* in Brussels and then in Paris at the French artists’ Salon. Rodin is accused by critics of having cast a mould from a live model.

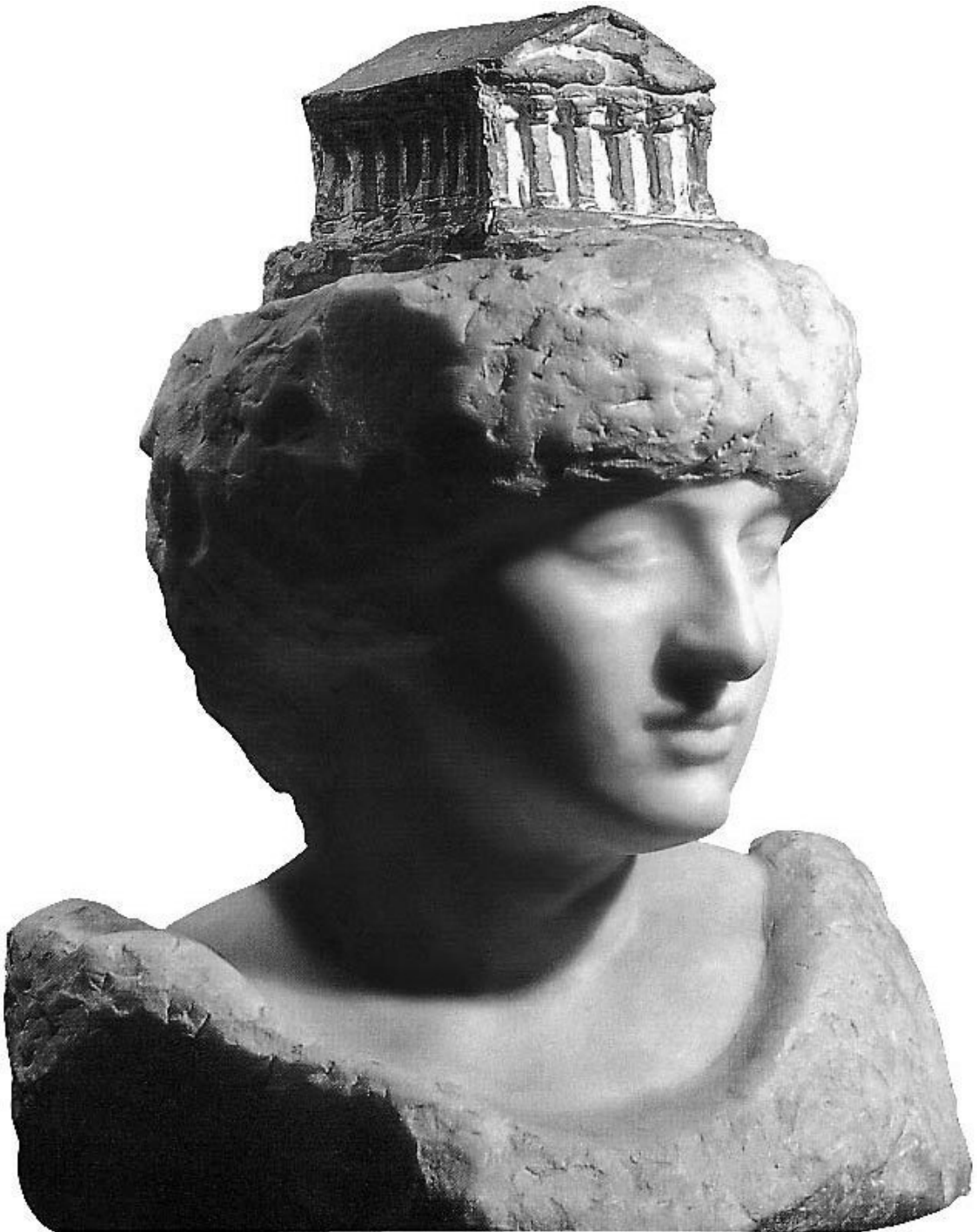
1880: The state buys *The Age of Bronze* and asks Rodin to design a door for the future Museum of Decorative Arts. He will work on the project for the rest of his life, although the museum was never built.

1881: He learns engraving with Alphonse Legros in London.

1883: He meets nineteen-year-old Camille Claudel.

1885: The Municipal Court of Calais commissions a commemorative monument to Eustache de Saint Pierre, which will become the *Monument to the Burghers of Calais*, inaugurated in Rodin’s presence in 1895.

1887: He is named a knight in the Legion of Honour.



1888: The state commissions *The Kiss*, in marble, for the Universal Exposition of 1889.

1889: He is a founding member of the National Society of Fine Arts.

1890: The project *Monument to Victor Hugo (Victor Hugo seated)* for the Pantheon is refused.

1891: A new model for the *Monument to Victor Hugo (Victor Hugo standing)* is designed and the Society of Men of Letters commissions a *Monument to Balzac*.

1898: Splits with Camille Claudel, then aged 34. The Society of Men of Letters refuses the *Monument to Balzac* in plaster.

1899: First expositions in Brussels, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and The Hague.

1902: Rodin meets the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), who will be his secretary from September 1905 until May 1906.

1904: Rodin meets the Duchess of Choiseul with whom he splits with in 1912. First exhibition of *The Thinker* (plaster/large model) at the International Society of London and then at the Paris Salon (bronze). He has an affair with Gwendolen Mary John. She becomes his mistress and serves as his model for *The Whistler Muse*.

1905: Rodin is nominated a member of the Superior Council of Fine Arts.

1906: *The Thinker* is placed in front of the Pantheon. Rodin does a series of watercolours of Cambodian dancers and exhibits them at Marseille's Colonial Exposition.

1907: First big exhibition devoted solely to his drawings is at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris.

1908: Moves to the Hôtel Biron (now the Musée Rodin) in Paris.

1910: Rodin is named as a commander of the Legion of Honour.

1913: Confinement of Camille Claudel. Exhibition at Paris Faculty of Medicine where the older works of Rodin's collection are shown for the first time.

1914: Rodin flees during the war and leaves for England and then Rome.

1916: Rodin falls seriously ill. The State gives three successive donations to Rodin's collections.

1917: Rodin marries Rose Beuret on January 29th, but she dies shortly afterwards on February 14th, not long before Rodin himself, who passed away on November 17th. *The Thinker* sits at the base of their tomb.

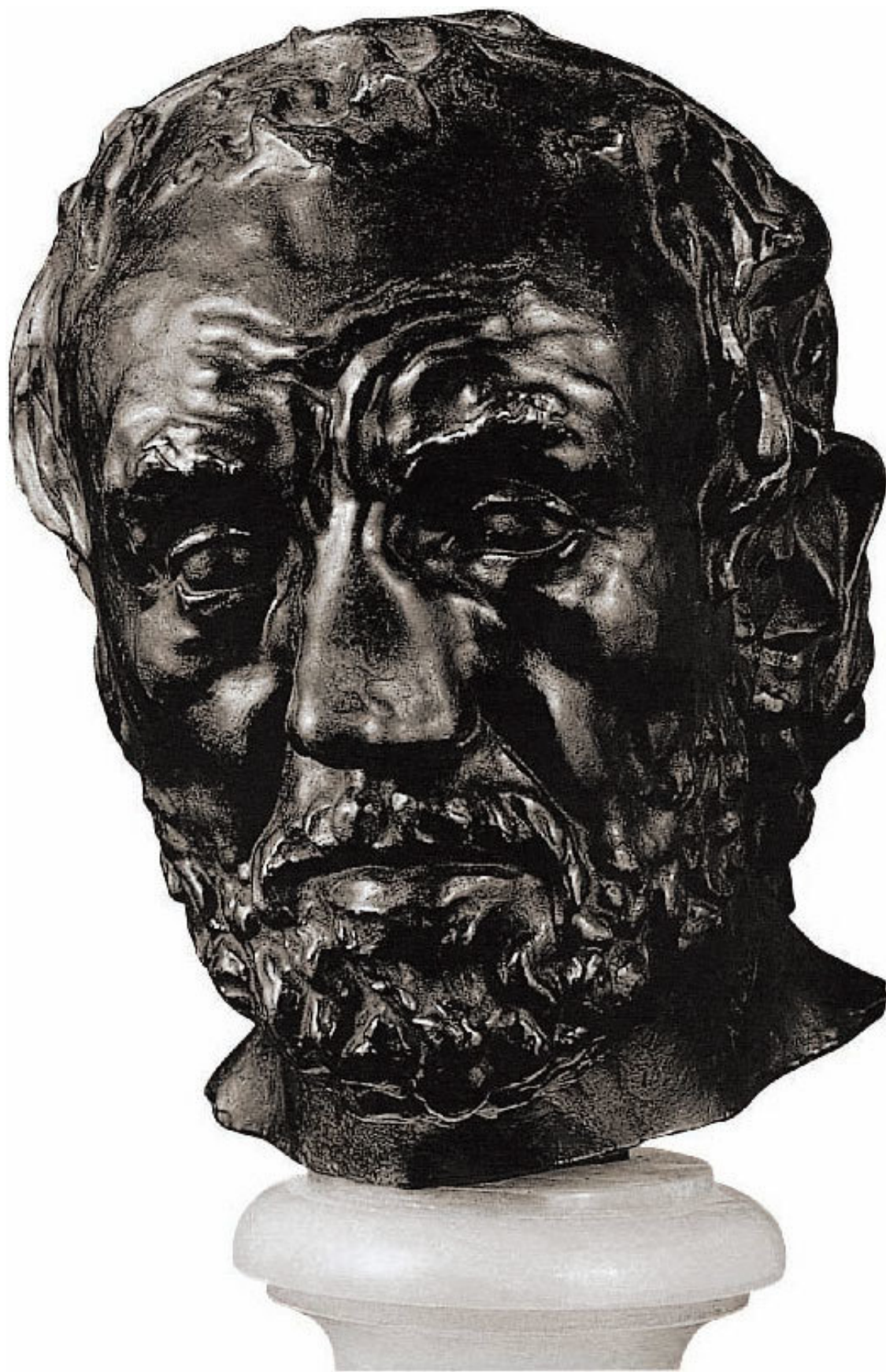
At the principal annual art exhibition, the Salon, in Paris in 1898, the sculptor Auguste Rodin exhibited two enormous statues – *The Kiss* and the *Monument to Balzac*. He was fifty-eight years old and nearing the height of his fame. It was both a challenging gesture and a brave response to professional and private adversity. Originally the embracing couple in *The Kiss* had been envisaged on a much smaller scale to take place on a massive pair of doors commissioned from the French government for a projected new museum of decorative art. Rodin had been working on the doors, known as *The Gates of Hell*, for almost twenty years; but by 1898 it had become clear that the museum would not be built. That year, Rodin enlarged the couple massively in marble for the Salon.





Jean-Baptiste Rodin, the Artist's Father
c. 1864
Bronze, 41.5 × 28 × 24 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris





The Man with the Broken Nose
1864

Bronze, 26 × 18 × 23 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris





The Age of Bronze

1877

Bronze, 180 × 80 × 60 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris

The *Balzac* sculpture was another failed public monument, initially commissioned by a literary society in 1891 to commemorate the monumental nineteenth-century writer. After seven years of preparatory study, Rodin had decided to exhibit the work to reassure his critics that the project was nearing completion. When the committee responsible for the work saw it at the Salon, roughly cast in plaster, they rejected it and terminated their contract with him.





Call to Arms

1879

Bronze, 112 × 58 × 50 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris





The Thinker
1879–1880
Plaster

Musée Rodin, Paris

Certainly both works, so antithetical in style, discharge conspicuous erotic energies – a blatant indication that this element of the erotic, of sensual force and sexual primacy, was central to Rodin's life and work. Of course the differences between the two works are immediately the more striking. If it still surprises us to know that both these works were made by the same man, the well-dressed Parisian crowds who saw them prominently on display at the Salon were equally nonplussed.





Saint John the Baptist
1880
Bronze
Musée Rodin, Paris





Adam

1880

Bronze

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Kiss is smoothly carved in gleaming white marble, its massive lovers presented as idealised and divinely beautiful protagonists. The *Balzac* on the other hand, crudely cast in plaster (other versions in bronze and marble were made later), is strikingly unpleasant, with its jagged profiles, rough textures and a more or less complete disregard for anatomical detail, accuracy and finish. In *The Kiss*, the entwined couple enact a titillating, almost comic encounter. The figures were originally inspired by Dante's lovers Paolo and Francesca, damned eternally for incest, but here revealing nothing of their awful, poetic fate (Rodin made another, darker version for the doors). It is the woman who has initiated proceedings – while she forthrightly embraces her lover and has moved her right leg over onto his lap, he only tentatively touches her left hip. (In his own love affairs it was usually Rodin who made the running).





Third Maquette for 'The Gates of Hell'
1880
Plaster, 111.5 × 75 × 30 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris





Dante and Virgil or Paolo and Francesca
c. 1880
Pencil and ink wash
Musée Rodin, Paris





Cavalier Galloping on Horseback, Right Profile

c. 1880

Pencil, red ink, red and brown ink, wash on buff paper mounted on support paper, 18.7 × 16 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris

The *Balzac* offers no comparable narrative interest. Veering off the vertical, this enormous, distorted figure twists with terrifying force upwards – more an expression of the writer's (and the sculptor's) creative powers than a literal description of Balzac's physical appearance. 'A monument, not a monsieur reproduced in stone,' as Rodin himself put it.

The Gates of Hell

1880–1881

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

Musée Rodin, Paris





There is, however, much that the works share. Both have been the subject of scandal and violent disapproval. A slightly earlier version of *The Kiss* was removed from an exhibition in Chicago in 1893 because the frank nature of the couple's embrace was considered too candid a sexual prelude for public taste.





The Thinker
1880–1881

Bronze
Musée Rodin, Paris

Even as late as 1952 there was strong opposition to the Tate Gallery in London buying a copy for permanent display.

The *Balzac* was rejected by the committee who had commissioned it, describing Rodin's monolith as 'a shapeless mass, a nameless thing, a colossal foetus.' Others at the time called it 'a toad in a sack'.





The Gates of Hell
1880–1917
Bronze, 635 × 400 × 85 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris

The novelist Émile Zola and a number of other prominent public figures supported Rodin and petitioned the Parisian authorities to buy it for the city, but to no avail. The controversy was caught up in the explosive political storm then dividing French society: the Dreyfus affair, in which the State stood accused of complicity in anti-Semitic discrimination against a Jewish officer serving in the French army. Those who maintained that the government had acted dishonourably supported Rodin and the two issues were linked in the press.





Eve

1881

Bronze

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





Ugolin

c. 1881

Plaster, 41.5 × 40.3 × 58.7 cm

Musée Rodin, Paris

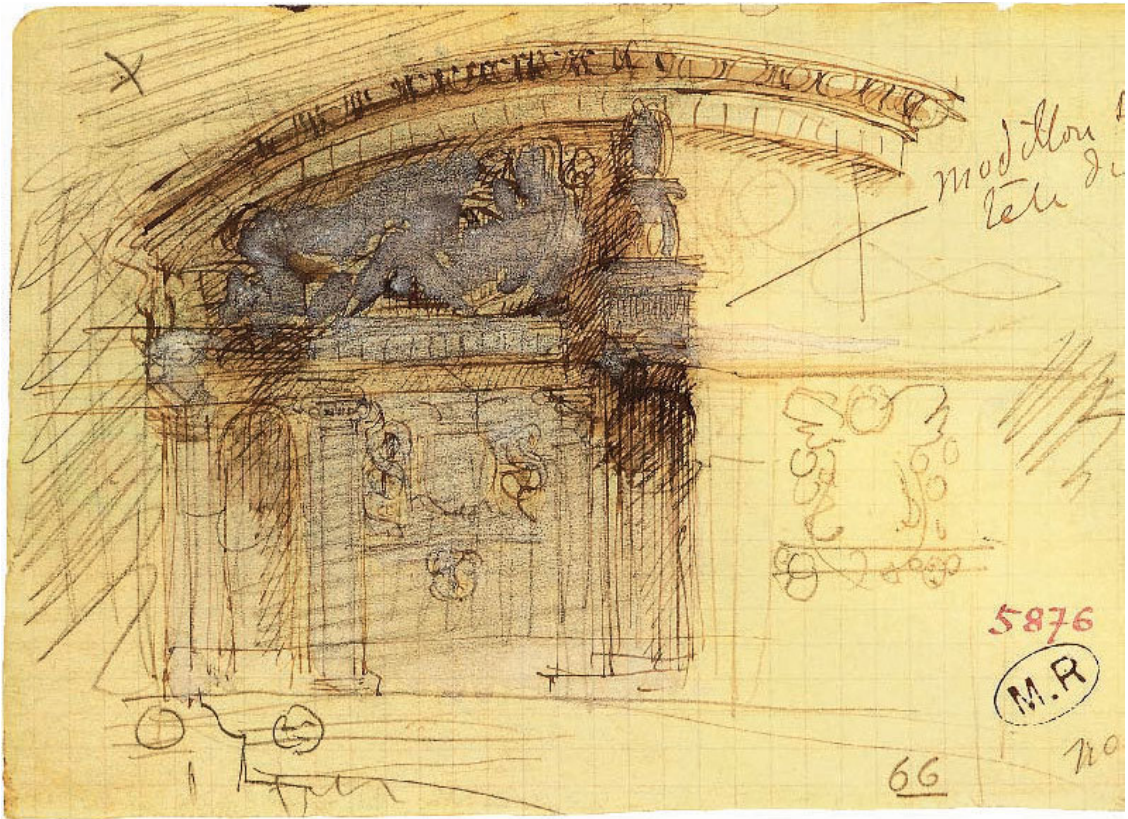
However what was probably considered most shocking about the statue was rarely acknowledged. In a preparatory nude study for the piece, which was subsequently cast in bronze as an independent work, Rodin modelled a figure with his hands held together clasping his erect penis. The final *Balzac* is clothed – draped with a dressing gown that seems to seethe with seismic force. (Balzac, when he wrote, worked sixteen hours a day, ingested vast amounts of tobacco smoke and coffee and wore a dressing gown). But beneath its folds, a prominent bulge suggests strongly that this Balzac seems to be doing exactly the same as his predecessor.





The Three Shades
1881
Bronze, 96.6 × 92 × 54.1 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris





Pediment of the Saint-Pierre Abbey

c. 1881

Pencil, stump, ink wash and gouache on buff paper, 9.1 × 14.4 cm

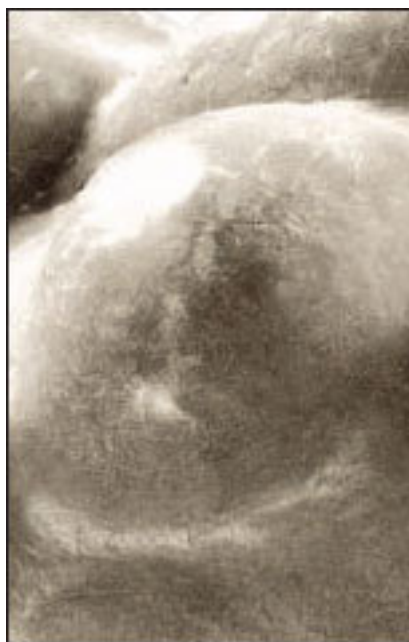
Musée Rodin, Paris





The Crouching Woman
c. 1881–1882
Plaster, 53 × 93.5 × 45 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris

Moreover the form of the whole is distinctly phallic. Both sculptures then share, at heart, a dominant sexual motive power. This force is essential to much of Rodin's art and is mirrored in many of the stories recorded about the man himself. These stories concentrate on his physical presence (despite his small stature), his sexual energy, his hands, his piercing blue eyes and his heavy step.





Torso of Adèle
1882
Plaster, 16 × 50 × 19 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris





I Am Beautiful

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