

# RODIN - Gallery Guide

## INTRODUCTION



*Jean d'Aire; one of the Burgheers of Calais*

So deeply did Auguste Rodin (1840 - 1917) identify with *The Thinker*, *The Burgheers of Calais* and *Balzac* that he seems to be as much the companion of his best-known works as he was their creator. This exhibition investigates how this perception came about and explores Rodin's lifelong engagement with the realisation of ideas and emotional states in three-dimensional form; as he told his early biographer, Judith Cladel, 'the body is a cast on which passions are imprinted'.

The selection of works is intended to chart Rodin's creative journey, from his first daring standing figure, *The Age of Bronze*, through his engagement with public commissions such as *The Gates of Hell* and *Balzac*, to his lionisation after his triumphant one-man exhibition at the Pavillon de l'Alma, Paris, in 1900. Rodin's monuments and studies of individual heads and hands, as well as his fragmentary sculptures with their evidence of process, heralded the modern age of sculpture. This aspect is the subject of *Rodin: The Sculptors' View*, a specially made film being shown in the Large Weston Room for which eight contemporary sculptors, including Anthony Caro, Tony Cragg, Rachel Whiteread and Antony Gormley, were filmed in their studios.

Woven into this chronological presentation is the story of Rodin's relationship with Britain: his initial visit to London in 1881; his circle of British writers, artists and collectors; his brief and unsatisfactory relationship with the Royal Academy during the 1880s; and the public acclaim he enjoyed after 1900, leading to the acquisition of his work by national and regional museums, the installation of *The Burgheers of Calais* outside the Palace of Westminster, and the sculptor's donation of eighteen works to the British nation in 1914.



*She Who Once Was the Beautiful Helmetmaker's Wife*

## ARTISTIC FORMATION AND EARLY RECOGNITION

Auguste Rodin was born in 1840, the son of a minor functionary in the police department. At the age of fourteen he was admitted to the Petite Ecole, a school for those planning a career in the decorative arts. After three failed attempts to enter the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Rodin was obliged to earn a living working as an assistant to other sculptors, making charming figures like the terracotta Spring (c. 1875; cat. 8), following his employer, Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, to Brussels and forming a separate partnership with Joseph Van Rasbrough to realise large-scale public works. Rodin's earliest surviving work with an original stamp is *Man with a Broken Nose* (1864; see cats 4, 5 and 7), which was rejected in 1865 from the annual state-run Paris Salon but accepted in a marble version ten years later.

Rodin travelled to Italy in 1876 and the impact of the work of Michelangelo, Donatello and other masters was seminal. On his return to Belgium, he completed *The Age of Bronze* (1877; cat. 11). Contrary to the contemporary convention for idealised allegorical male nudes, Rodin gave the figure an ambiguous title and pose, studying the body of his soldier model so closely that when the work was viewed in the Salon he was accused of casting it from a living figure. The over-life-size St. John the Baptist (1879; cat. 12) was inspired by a pose that the model Cesar Pignatelli adopted; the traditional attributes of animal skin, loincloth and staff were dispensed with to create a lifelike representation. A variation of the work, the *Bust of St John the Baptist* (1879; cat. 13), was accepted at the Royal Academy's annual exhibition in 1882. Four years later, however, despite the support of Frederic Leigh ton PEA., Rodin's *Idyll of Ixelles* (1885; cat. 30) was rejected.

## THE 1880S: EARLY SUPPORT AND THE INCEPTION OF 'THE GATES OF HELL'

Rodin came to London in July 1880 (to stay with the painter and engraver Alphonse Legros, who had been a fellow student at the Petite Ecole. Legros had settled in London in 1863, becoming Professor at the Slade School of Art in 1875. Guidance from his friend led Rodin to make his first drypoints (cats 16, 17, 19), but more importantly he was introduced to influential people who immediately recognised the originality and exceptional qualities of his work. These included the writers Cosmo Monkhouse, Robert Louis Stevenson and William Ernest Henley, soon to become editor of the recently established Magazine of Art, and the stockbroker and adventurous collector Constantine Ionides, who bought *Kissing Babes* (1881; cat. 29) and the first bronze cast of *The Thinker* (1881-82; Gallery 4). Although the portrait busts of Henley (1884-86; cat. 27), Legros (1882; cat. 31) and Victor Hugo (1883; cat. 25), the colossus of French literature, are based upon Renaissance prototypes, Rodin's lively handling conveys his sitters' intelligence and his empathy with them. Of equal personal resonance are the portraits made during the same period of Rose Beuret (c. 1882; cat. 28), who shared Rodin's life from 1864 until her death in 1917, and Camille Claudel (c. 1884; cat. 98), a talented student of Rodin and his great passion.

Rodin drew throughout his career, filling notebooks and scraps of paper with direct studies from life and architectural and ornamental motifs, some from his memory and imagination. When in 1880 he received his first official commission, from the French state, to create a set of doors for a new museum of decorative arts, Rodin turned to Lorenzo Ghiberti's Florence Baptistery doors for their format and narrative potential and to the *Inferno* from Dante's *Divine Comedy* for his subject matter. Earlier sketches of cherubs and images of maternity took on violent, darker moods as they turned into centaurs and visions of Medea and Ugolino and the damned souls. Dramatic use of light and shade, reinforced with brown ink and gouache, and the influence of the tumultuous compositions of Romantic painters such as Eugène Delacroix are apparent in these scenes for *The Gates of Hell*.

## THE 1880S AND 1890S:

### THE FREE-STANDING FIGURES, 'THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS' AND 'BALZAC'

After a year of preparation, Rodin began modelling free-standing figures for *The Gates of Hell* directly from life, rejecting predetermined poses to allow bodies to speak their own language. A growing number of these were treated as independent sculptures on many different scales, as in *Eve* (1881-82; cat. 74), a standing figure intended to counterbalance Adam, the two conceived for either side of the *Gates*, and *Crouching Woman* (c.1881-82; cat. 80), who appeared first on the tympanum (Gallery 4) before being enlarged. The influence of Michelangelo is apparent in the tension and dramatic character of these figures.

In late 1884 the mayor of Calais approached Rodin to make a monument to the city's medieval hero Eustache de St-Pierre. Drawing on Jean Froissart's *Chronicles of France* (1360-65), Rodin chose to represent the moment when, in 1347, not just Eustache but five other burghers left the besieged town, bearing its keys, to offer their lives to King Edward III of England in order to spare their fellow citizens from starvation. Breaking with the conventions of public monumental sculpture, Rodin adopted a non-pyramidal arrangement and modelled the figures from life, initially in the nude (cats 130, 134) before applying drapery and positioning the six as a group. Each figure conveys heroism and vulnerability, their resignation, fear, self-sacrifice and regret made manifest in their gestures, powerfully expressive faces and the strangely disproportionate scale of their feet and hands. Three of the *Burghers* were shown at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, in 1887 and the whole group at the same gallery two years later. The completion of the monument was delayed by the economic depression of the mid 1880s, but funds were finally allocated for a bronze cast that was inaugurated outside Calais Town Hall in 1893. Twelve casts have since been made, one of which was purchased by the National Art Collections Fund in 1911 and unveiled outside the Palace of Westminster in 1915, originally on a high plinth as Rodin intended for this historic site.

Commissioned from Rodin by the Société des Gens de Lettres in 1891, *Balzac* was intended for the place du Palais Royal in Paris as a memorial to the author of *The Human Comedy*. Beginning with the face and physique of a coachman from Balzac's region, Rodin made dozens of preliminary small scale studies, eventually turning to the physique of one of the *Burghers*, Jean d'Aire (cat. 44), to capture an explicit

relationship between sexual arousal and creative energy. This body was draped in the monk's robe that Balzac habitually wore when writing, before it was enlarged to over 2 metres high and combined with the head with its sunken eyes, lank hair and troubled look. *Balzac* was presented at the Salon of 1898 and, although it generated huge acclaim from friends and critics alike, the work so shocked the Societe that the piece was rejected. Rodin knew what he had achieved: 'I sought in *Balzac*, as in *Victor Hugo*, to render in sculpture what was not photographic. One can find errors in my *Balzac*, the artist does not always realise his dream; but I believe in the truth of my principle; and *Balzac*, rejected, or not, is nonetheless in the line of demarcation between commercial sculpture and the art of sculpture that we no longer have in Europe...' I search in nature for this life and amplify it by exaggerating the hole and lump, to gain thereby more light, after which I search for a synthesis of the whole.'

### THE GATES OF HELL (1880-1917)



Although he had initially intended to build up the Gates from rectangular compartments, Rodin's visits to Gothic cathedrals during the 1880s led him to explore the power of deeper relief. He studied the effect of attaching hundreds of small sculptures to the plaster panels that, he had constructed in his studio at the rue de l'Universite. The overall design underwent a constant process of evolution as Rodin added, altered and



replaced figures, as demonstrated in the crowded tympanum (1888—89; cat. 87). Before he exhibited the *Gates* in the specially built Pavillon de l'Alma in Paris in 1900, Rodin removed the figures in high relief, apart from *The Three Shades* surmounting the tympanum. By the time the *Gates* were cast in bronze for the first time in 1926-29 (Courtyard), the figures had been reinstated. Rodin's obsession with the treatment of the mouldings on the *Gates* corresponds to his fascination with architectural motifs, seen in his drawings.

The *Gates* were henceforth the 'crucible' for Rodin's most inventive and explorative work, as is shown in *Meditation* (c.1881-82; cat.82), *The Female Martyr* (1800; cat. 121) and *Ariane* (19.10; cat. 213), all of which began life as figures on the tympanum.

## THE TASTE OF BRITISH COLLECTORS: RODIN AND SYMBOLISM

Symbolism, a movement in the arts that emerged primarily in France in the 1880s, rejected naturalism in favour of subjects that intimated the world of ideas and profound emotions, adopting formal conventions that stressed the artificial and the suggestive. Despite consistently modelling from life, Rodin responded to the spirit of such Symbolist writers as Stéphane Mallarmé, Camille Mauclair, Octave Mirbeau and the English critic Arthur Symonds in his deliberate avoidance of finish and in the allusive nature of his subject matter, as in *Illusions Fallen to Earth* (c. 1900; cat. 151).

From the late 1890s Rodin's reputation began to spread as a result of a series of travelling one-man exhibitions in Europe, as well as presentations of his sculpture at academics and international art fairs, including the exceptional one-man exhibition that took place in the Pavillon de l'Alma at the same time as the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. Several individuals began to form major Rodin collections, particularly Max Linde of Lübeck, Carl Jacobsen of Copenhagen and Mrs John Simpson of Philadelphia. Although British collectors' enthusiasm for Rodin often tended towards tamer sculptures such as *Brother and Sister* (c. 1890; cat. 153), and commissions for portrait busts (Gallery 7, they shared with their foreign counterparts a taste for sculptures that communicated the master's own subjective, personal variant of Symbolism. James Smith, a wine importer from Liverpool, acquired *The Danaïd* (1889; cat. 117) and *The Death of Athens* (before 1903; cat. 162), and the remarkably adventurous Welsh collector Gwendoline Davies bought *Illusions Fallen to Earth* (c. 1900; cat. 151), *The Clouds* (before 1902; cat. 161) and *The Earth and the Moon* (1898-99; cat. 160).

*The Kiss* (c. 1881-82; cat. 78), initially conceived as a representation of the damned lovers Paolo and Francesca for *The Gates of Hell*, was eliminated from the design in 1887 and replaced by *Fugit Amor* (before 1887; cat. 113). It soon became a popular sculpture in its own right and a marble version, now at the Tate (cat. 79), was commissioned through William Rothenstein, an English painter and friend of Rodin, for the American archaeologist and collector Edward Perry Warren, and delivered to his house in Lewes, East Sussex, in 1904.

## RODIN AND THE ANTIQUE

Rodin associated his passion for collecting antiquities with memories of visiting the Louvre, where he made drawings of Classical sculpture (Gallery 2): 'The gods of Olympus told me everything a young man might profitably hear.' He was intrigued by the Parthenon frieze (cats 198, 199), seeing it in its entirety on his first visit to the British Museum in 1881. Two years later, he filled a sketchbook with drawings of the museum's Egyptian figures, associating the head of an attendant god from the Assyrian temple at Nimrud, dedicated to Nairn, god of writing, with the bust of Victor Hugo that he was struggling to realise (Gallery 2). Although he dreamed throughout his life of visiting the Acropolis, the collections of original works and casts in the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) became his second Classical focus after Rome.

Through dealers in Paris, Rodin acquired antiquities, exercising the eye of a sculptor rather than that of an archaeologist or connoisseur: 'Now I have made a collection of mutilated gods, in fragments, some of them real masterpieces. I spend time with them and they teach me.' They were displayed at the Villa des Brillants, Meudon, where he moved in 1893, and later at the Hôtel Biron in Paris, which became the Musée Rodin

after the sculptor's death. These private contemplations encouraged Rodin to explore how fragments or dismembered figures might be read as finished objects capable of great expressiveness, as in *The Walking Man* (c. 1900; cat. 210) - a reconception of the torso and legs of *St. John the Baptist* - and the little figure placed on a sphere (c. 1905; cat. 191). Rodin's favourite medium for realising new ideas was plaster, and he preserved in drawers small heads, arms, feet and other body parts as a repertoire from which to make variants and composite pieces, giving away selections such as the box presented to Lady Sackville in 1913 (cat. 197).

## RODIN'S BRITISH ADMIRERS

Despite his lack of English, Rodin's enthusiasm for British society was matched by the increasingly keen interest, verging on infatuation, with which it viewed him. He came regularly between 1902 and 1914, receiving honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford and Glasgow. King Edward VII visited Meudon in 1908. From 1900, prominent British social, political and cultural figures as well as society beauties were eager to be immortalised by Rodin. He increased his prices, but could not stem demand. In 1905 the author and critic George Moore explained to the social hostess Nancy Cunard that 'no sculpture has been done since antiquity that for beauty of execution can compare with Rodin's... 'motor cars and hunters are passing things and drop into wreckage but a bust outlives Rome'. George Bernard Shaw (19??, cat. 177) declared characteristically: 'Any man, a contemporary of Rodin, who has had a portrait bust made by anyone else, will go down in history (if he goes down at all) as a ridiculous cretin.' Rodin flattered his female subjects by contrasting the effect of silky skin and a dreamy look in the polished marble forms with a rough-cut, *non-finito* treatment of the block of stone. His images of the society hostess Mrs Charles Hunter (1906-07; cats 175, 174) and the beautiful Eve Fairfax (1901-05; cats 166-69) pleased their sitters, as did his bust of the politician George Wyndham (1904; cat. 175), Secretary of State for Ireland 1900-05, who supported the purchase of *St John the Baptist* by the British nation in 1902.

## THE MONUMENT TO WHISTLER (1905-17)

In December 1903, Rodin was elected president of the recently established International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers, following the death of the society's first president, James McNeill Whistler. He was invited to make a memorial to the painter to be raised on the Thames Embankment at Cheyne Walk in London. Responding to a brief for a 'Winged Victory symbolising Whistler's triumph - the triumph of Art over Enemies', he proposed a Classical figure of a muse mounting a rock. The model was Gwen John, a recent graduate of the Slade School of Art. Their relationship was complex, the sculptor acting as mentor and protector, the infatuated student as muse and model for the monument and for several portrait heads (c.1906-11, cats 224 -26). As the studies were scaled up to a life size model, the monument became increasingly less acceptable to the commissioning body. It remained unfinished and undelivered, a marvellous standing portrait of John (1914-17; cat. 231). As often before Rodin's most daring and intimate ideas surfaced in small related studies, like *Little Torso of Iris* (undated; cat. 232).

## THE LATE DRAWINGS (1890S-1917)

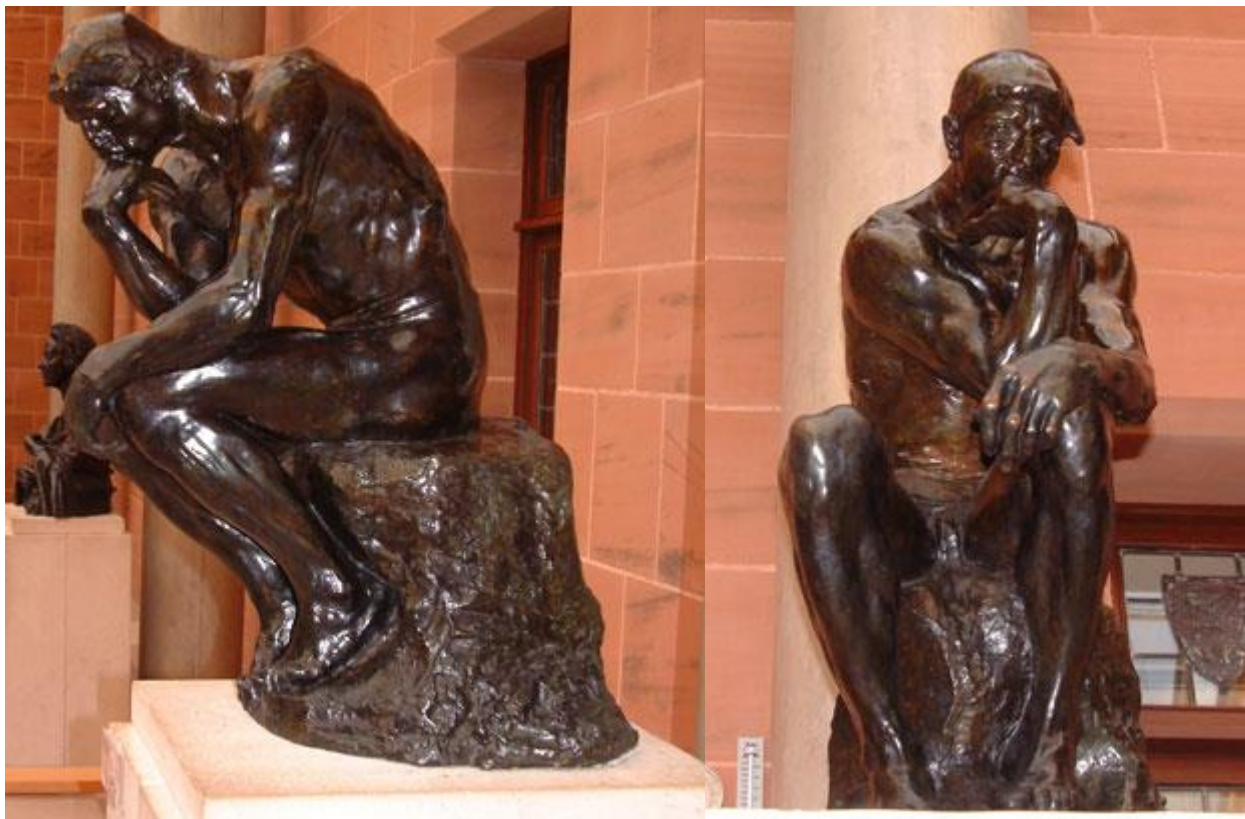
Rodin returned to drawing with renewed vigour in the 1890s. By this date he was able to afford near-daily sessions from life. Some models were acrobatic dancers, others posed as Sapphic couples; nearly all were encouraged to relax and let Rodin record their intimate gestures and postures, *initially in simple* outline, catching them from different viewpoints. As a second stage Rodin added watercolour or traced the image onto a fresh sheet, or made a cut out before further elaboration. The sketches acquired titles such as *Cleopatra* (c. 1898; cat. 263) and *Nereid* (c. 1900; cat. 281), while a few of the least legible were associated with words like *Chaos* (c. 1907; cat. 283). Difficult to date precisely, the drawings with vermilion wash were probably executed in the 1890s, whereas those modelled with an eraser and stump are dated after 1900. The drawings were exhibited during Rodin's lifetime and received acclaim, some critics likening their essential simplification of form to Japanese art and others recognising Rodin's belief that everything in nature was inspiration for the artist, not least the eroticism of 'woman the animal; woman, in a strange sense, the idol' (Arthur Symonds).

## THE 'MONUMENT TO VICTOR HUGO' AND THE 1914 DONATION TO THE BRITISH NATION

In 1889 Rodin was commissioned by the French state to create a monument to Victor Hugo for installation in the Pantheon in Paris. Using his 1883 portrait bust ((Gallery 2) as a starting point, Rodin chose to show the ageing poet rapt in thought, his left arm outstretched, surrounded by muses (c. 1897; see cat. 203). The work became deeply personal; by 1909 the muses had turned into partial figures with a carnal energy and seductive quality of their own. Eventually Rodin accepted a compromise: a standing figure of Hugo for the Pantheon, a lonely seated portrait in marble for the garden of the Palais Royal, inaugurated in 1909 (see cat. 348), and a variation of Hugo with two muses, which is the bronze that was erected on the Avenue Victor Hugo in 1964.

One of these figures, *Muse* (1896; cat. 205; also known as *Meditation* or *The Inner Voice*), was included in the group exhibition 'French Art: Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art, 1800-1885' at Grosvenor House, Park Lane in July 1914. When selecting work for this exhibition, Rodin deliberately juxtaposed celebrated early sculptures such as *The Age of Bronze* (Gallery 1), variations of works for the *Gates* such as *The Prodigal Son* (1905; Gallery 3), recent portrait busts including that of George Wyndham (Gallery 7) and several of his least commercial works, such as a terracotta head of Dante (c. 1908; cat. 165), a strange *Head* (before 1911; Gallery 8), a massive body of *Cybele* (c. 1890; cat. 212) and the unique bronze *Crouching Woman* (c. 1895; cat. 208). The outbreak of the First World War prevented the sculptures' return to France and, with the encouragement of Rodin's friends, the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum was persuaded to display them in September 1914. Two months later, moved by the joint action of French and British troops in France, Rodin formally donated the works to Britain, his only gift to a foreign nation and one of the finest collections of works gathered by the sculptor during his lifetime.

## 'THE THINKER' AND THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY



*The Thinker*

Photography played an important role at most stages of Rodin's creative life. He tested ideas in pencil on photographic prints and sent records of work in progress to admirers and magazine editors. Equally, photographs were tools for self-promotion, as in the officially contracted prints made by Eugene Druet and Jacques-Ernest Bulloz. These and the unofficial, exceptionally evocative and innovative images taken by the

two English photographers Stephen Haweis and Henry Coles between 1903 and 1904, including a poetic sequence of *The Thinker*, record the quiet, meditative atmosphere Rodin sought when he displayed his sculpture.

Initially modelled for *The Gales of Hell* in 1881-82 to represent Dante contemplating his *Inferno*, *The Thinker* came to represent the poet-thinker, an embodiment of the three writers most influential to Rodin - Dante, Hugo and Charles Baudelaire - as well as a self-portrait of Rodin. The sculpture is one of the few Rodin pieces to have undergone no modification save enlargement, which occurred prior to its presentation to exceptional critical acclaim in London in January 1904 and then in Paris.

*The Thinker* summarises the achievement of an artist of formidable force and energy. Consistently creative and exceptionally innovative for his time, Rodin was recognised as the author of work that, as William Rothenstein wrote, 'combined an impassioned interest in tense and nervous form with a poetical vision — an artist's poetry'.

*Catherine Lampert and MaryAnne Stevens*