

**Name: Yungfong Tang (aka Frank Tang)**

**Chosen artwork: The Thinker / Le Penseur (1881) by Auguste Rodin**

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My name: Frank Yungfong Tang Date: May 30, 2023

**Name: Yungfong TANG (aka Frank TANG)**

**Class: ARTS 2C, Spring 2023, De Anza College**

**Due Date: June 1, 2023**

**Title: The Thinker / Le Penseur (1881) by Auguste Rodin**

As the single gigantic dark gray bronze sculpture centering two floors tall octagon-shaped Susan & John Diekman Gallery in the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University (Fig. 1-12), The Thinker (French: Le Penseur), sculptured by Auguste Rodin in 1881<sup>1</sup>, no doubt it is the most significant artworks inside the best University in the west coast of the United States.

Auguste Rodin was a French artist born in Paris, France in 1840<sup>2</sup>. He started artistic training when he was 14 years old in *La petite Ecole de Dessin*<sup>3</sup>. Between 1857 and 1861, he attempted to enter the *École des Beaux-Arts School*<sup>4</sup> sculpture program, but he failed the entrance exam three times<sup>5</sup>. He was enlisted in the Franco-Prussian War (July 1870 to January 1871)<sup>6</sup> but soon was discharged due to his myopia<sup>7</sup>. First exhibited in Brussels in 1877, Rodin's breakout sculpture, The Age of Bronze<sup>8</sup>, made him well known to the world because of its critical scandal<sup>9</sup>. The work is “so intensely real and glowing with life”<sup>10</sup> and therefore Rodin was accused of casting it from a real human body.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hecker 36.

<sup>2</sup> See Rodin & Goldscheider 2.

<sup>3</sup> *La petite Ecole de Dessin* is “a school for young craftsmen”. See Dircks 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> “...Western Europe’s premiere school of art in the nineteenth century, encompassing painting, sculpture, and architecture”. See Madoff 39.

<sup>5</sup> See Simon 106.

<sup>6</sup> See Jorden et al 6.

<sup>7</sup> See Benedek & Rodin 28.

<sup>8</sup> See Elsen & Jamieson 41-46.

<sup>9</sup> “It caused a critical scandal for its extreme naturalism and ambiguous subject matter.” See “Auguste Rodin: The Age of Bronze (L’Age D’airain): French.”

<sup>10</sup> See Nicoll 526.

In 1879, when Rodin was 39 years old, the French government commissioned him to design a monumental door for the entrance to a proposed new building of the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris<sup>11</sup>. Rodin designed *Le Penseur*, translated to English as *The Thinker*, to be placed in the center of the tympanum of *The Gates of Hell* (Fig. 13) masterpiece around 1880-1881<sup>12</sup>. The building project was later canceled. However, Rodin kept working on the design of different elements of this door<sup>13</sup>. Jean Baud (Fig. 14), a French boxing champion and wrestler, was modeled for this sculpture<sup>14</sup>. The original 27-inch version was first exhibited in 1889 at the Exposition Monet-Rodin at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris<sup>15</sup>. A bronze of this original 27-inch version, with a Florentine cap, casted in 1884 can now be found at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 15 & Fig. 16). Rodin later removed the Florentine cap and casted the first bronze of the current version in 1896, which now can be found at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva<sup>17</sup>. The first casted monumental bronze of *The Thinker* was exhibited at the Salon of 1904<sup>18</sup>. The reaction was unprecedented. It became a favorite of the press at that time<sup>19</sup>. It was also well received by British art critic William Ernest Henley who introduced this work, with other of Rodin's pieces on *The Gates of Hell*, to his readers in Great Britain and made it even better known outside France<sup>20</sup>. Bronze casts of *The Thinker* are now displayed in many museums around the world, including the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (Fig. 17 & Fig. 18), The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Fig. 19 & Fig. 20), and Legend of Honor in San Francisco (Fig. 21). Most importantly, Rodin instructed

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<sup>11</sup> See Vanhoutte 135-172.

<sup>12</sup> See Cheney 103-126.

<sup>13</sup> See Krauss 47-66.

<sup>14</sup> See Müllich.

<sup>15</sup> See "The Thinker."

<sup>16</sup> See Blanchetiére.

<sup>17</sup> See "Le Penseur, Élément de La Porte de l'enfer: Musées d'art et d'histoire de Genève."

<sup>18</sup> See Jamison 179.

<sup>19</sup> See "The Thinker."

<sup>20</sup> See Blanchetiére.

to place one of the numerous bronze casts of it in the gardens of Rodin's house in Meudon, on the tomb of him and his wife to use this sculpture as his headstone and epitaph<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 22).

The sculpture displayed inside the Cantor Arts Center of Stanford University is one of the 12 monumental casts which weighs one-ton and is 79-inch tall<sup>22</sup>. The sculpture depicted a naked male body sitting in a rock without wearing symbolic objects. Rodin originally intended to design *The Thinker* as Dante, but he later abandoned the idea of such linkage but instead rendered *The Thinker* as any human being who is thinking to create<sup>23</sup>.

Rodin used both lost-wax casting and sand casting processes to switch from plaster to bronze. The sand casting process was used in Rodin's time, but is now seldom used<sup>24</sup>. The lost-wax casting process is a very complex<sup>25</sup>. Rodin mainly worked on his aesthetic design of the sculpture on clay (Fig. 23). After he finishes his design in clay, he then passed the design to his assistant artisans to make plaster (Fig. 24), enlarged plaster, and then transfer to foundry to cast the plaster into bronze, all under his close supervision:

“A non-unusual sequence for a Rodin sculpture consisted of eight or nine states: the clay, then a plaster and occasionally a terra-cotta, then possibly a clay enlargement, followed by its casting in plaster, then a bronze or a carving, and if the latter, then a plaster that in turn would be used to make a bronze.” (Elsen, Albert, and Rosalyn Frankel Jamison. 25)

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<sup>21</sup> See Vujanovic 70.

<sup>22</sup> See “Rodin’s Iconic Sculpture, ‘The Thinker,’ Returns to Stanford.”

<sup>23</sup> See Phelan. “Rodin himself wrote about his intention: “The Thinker has a story. In the days long gone by I conceived the idea of the Gates of Hell. Before the door, seated on the rock, Dante thinking of the plan of the poem behind him... all the characters from the Divine Comedy. This project was not realized. Thin ascetic Dante in his straight robe separated from all the rest would have been without meaning. Guided by my first inspiration I conceived another thinker, a naked man, seated on a rock, his fist against his teeth, he dreams. The fertile thought slowly elaborates itself within his brain. He is no longer a dreamer, he is a creator””

<sup>24</sup> See “Lost-Wax Bronze Casting.”

<sup>25</sup> See “Bronze Casting.”

*The Thinker* in Stanford is coated with a black paint, reflecting light in gray shade or blue from the sky. While most people think color is not important in sculpture, Rodin considered color an essential element in his artwork by designing the reflection of the sculpture surface<sup>26</sup>. This work is unconventional and unique in the late 19th century European sculpture. Rodin rejected the traditional approach of realistic representation and the neoclassicist idealized rendering of the human body. Rodin also abandoned the use of accessories as symbols to provide a clue to the viewers of what his work represented. He rendered a human image which can be connected to any one in the society. It is essentially a three dimensional impressionist work echoing the same kind of aesthetic expression on the paintings by Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, or Édouard Manet.

Also in Paris, around the same time when Rodin conceived *The Thinker*, Edgar Degas scratched two female figures in a similar body posture in his pastel on paper, *Waiting* (Fig. 25), 1880-1882<sup>27</sup>. Like Rodin, Degas was also both a painter and a sculptor<sup>28</sup>, although all of his sculptures were casted after his death<sup>29</sup>. Both are French Impressionist artists who work at the same time in the same city. Both were born in Paris<sup>30 31</sup>. Degas was 6 years older than Rodin. Both experienced the changing political instability of July Monarchy (1830–1848), Second Republic (1848–1852), Second Empire (1852–1870), and Third Republic (1870–1940)<sup>32</sup> in France as well as the global Second Industrial Revolution (1850-1914)<sup>33</sup>, Long Depression (1873–1890)<sup>34</sup>, and the Belle Époque (1871–1914)<sup>35</sup> in western Europe. Both were enlisted by

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<sup>26</sup> See Rodin & Gsell 22.

<sup>27</sup> See Thomson vii.

<sup>28</sup> See Rosenfeld 105.

<sup>29</sup> See Failing.

<sup>30</sup> See Miller ix.

<sup>31</sup> See Dumas & Tinterow 201.

<sup>32</sup> See Sowerwine 3-11.

<sup>33</sup> See Horn 84.

<sup>34</sup> See Roberts 36.

<sup>35</sup> See Kalifa 16.

the National Guard to defend Paris during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). Both discovered they have eyesights issues short after in their military service<sup>36</sup>. Both were made known to the art world roughly the same time- Degars, in 1874 and Rodin, in 1877<sup>37</sup>. Both artists took an observation-redefined creation process of their artworks<sup>38</sup>. And eventually, both artists died in the same year, 1917<sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup>. While their family backgrounds are quite different, by the time of 1880, the year both works were made, both artists were not worried about their finances. Moreover, in recent years, some museums exhibit their artworks side by side due to their similar atheistic<sup>41</sup>.

It is difficult to compare and contrast a sculpture, a three dimensional artwork, against a drawing on paper, a two dimensional artwork. Fortunately, the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University provides us with a unique view setting for *The Thinker*. The display setting allows the viewers to see the work not only with 360 degrees of freedom, but also from both a wormview, seeing a large scaled one on a high platform, and also from a birdview, observing from the circular second floor platform. (Fig. 1-12).

In *Waiting*, Degars depicted two female figures sitting on a bench- a young ballerina and her chaperone. Both figures were dressed and in a sitting position and bending their body forward. Both are downward looking. Both pressed their right elbows against their right thigh to support their own weight. Different from *The Thinker*, their right elbows are pressed against their

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<sup>36</sup> See Benedek & Rodin 28 about Rodin's myopia. See Crisci-Richardson 261 about Degas's eyesights issue.

<sup>37</sup> Degas exhibited in the First Impressionist exhibition in 1874. See Degas & Boggs 234. Rodin first exhibited "The Age of Bronze" in 1877, Belgium. See Rodin & Caso 9 / Elsen & Jamieson 41-46.

<sup>38</sup> "In Degas's paintings, as in Rodin's sculptures, the artist builds his own reality rooted in observations of his world and then translated into his own particular vocabulary. Both artists establish their own forms and continuously redefine them so that an arm, a gesture, or a stance take on a different meaning depending on its context." (Benedek 24).

<sup>39</sup> See Dumas & Tinterow 201.

<sup>40</sup> See Hick 40.

<sup>41</sup> The National Gallery of Art, in Washington DC, displays the sculptures of Rodin and Degas in Gallery 2 of the West Building (see *West Building - ground floor*) as their permanent exhibition. The Holburne Museum, Bath, United Kingdom (See Wullscläger.), Von der Heydt Museum in Wuppertal, Germany(see Dege)

right thigh, instead of their difficult-to-touch left thigh. The ballerina's left hand is lower to massage her left heel. The chaperone places her left elbow on her left thigh and crosses her left forearm over and rests her right hand, facing up, over her right forearm. The chaperone's right hand is holding an umbrella. Both artists concerned less about the realistic facial expression of their subjects, but rather paid more attention toward the body postures. The feet' position of *The Thinker* is similar to the feet of the chaperone, while the feet of the ballerina are wild open. Degas uses the dresses to hint us what his subjects are experiencing- the difficult life of a young ballerina and her chaperone<sup>42</sup>. In contrast, *The Thinker* is a nude male, without any hints who this figure could be, and therefore, fit everyone everywhere in the world. In the *Waiting*, Degas uses white and blue to render the tutu of the ballerina, contrasting the pure black long dress, hat and umbrella of her chaperone. While displaying *The Thinker* in nice light condition, such as the one in the Stanford University, viewers not only see the sculpture in the color black and gray, but also different shades of blue reflecting the sky outside and skin tones reflecting the warm color lights. Notice Rodin also sculpted the upper left head of *The Thinker* with a shape of a hat-like structure which is not easily identified. Viewers cannot see the eyes and ears of the two females in *Waiting*, nor the mouth of *The Thinker*. Therefore, Degas depicted two females whom no one expressed sympathy toward, while Rodin crafted one who has not, at least not yet, verbally expressed himself.

All three figures in these two artworks are in a position of thinking. We often think *The Thinker* is thinking about a wise philosophical question, a difficult math problem, a moral ethical

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<sup>42</sup> "Marie lived a life of hardship. Her family lived in a district that was commonly associated with poverty and maisons closes. Her mother encouraged her and her younger sister to pursue ballet in order to escape from their impoverished living conditions. It is also speculated that Marie and her sister became call girls to make ends meet—both inside and outside the Paris Opera Ballet." (See Williamson) / "Girls who became ballerinas — at as young as 8 years old — worked 10 to 12 hours a day, six to seven days a week, under devastating conditions. (One ballerina died after her tutu lit on fire during a rehearsal.) After reaching "sexual maturity" at 13, girls were often paid to have sex with men waiting in the opera's wings. They earned the nickname "rats" because the animals were known to transmit syphilis." (See Frank).

dilemma, or a theological paradox. But, is he? Or maybe he is thinking about a similar set of problems as two female figures in the *Waiting* were thinking: Where is the food and the money to pay the rent tonight? How long will this suffering end? How could I convince myself of the worth of living after I traded my virginity for the money to buy medicine for my dying sister on her deathbed? Would my alcoholism father rape me again tonight? While Degas utilized the dresses of his subjects to connect us to the possible inner world of his subjects, Rodin connected his viewers to an abstract Thinker who could be linked to any one facing any kinds of issues, but maybe way too abstract that would be limited by the imagination capacity of viewers. Therefore, it could be a little bit too remote from the reality of the crude world we are now living in. The “thinking” in Degas’s *Waiting* uses a feminine setting to render a thinking of the crude reality of our daily life. The “thinking” in Rodin’s *The Thinker* employed a muscular form of classical antiquity to render a more optimistic wishful thinking projecting hope in the near distance reachable in his thinking. Degas reflected the emotional thinking, Rodin depicted the intellect.

### Conclusion

*The Thinker* is no doubt the most significant artworks crafted by Auguste Rodin and one of the most important sculptures made in the 19th century. It opened up a new world of three dimensional art. Under careful design of lighting and viewing settings, the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University empowers us to view it with richer color reflections and unique viewing angles to better appreciate the work. By comparing to the works by Degas, we see the kinds of problem thinking by the subject in a different level which help us to connect better with the art. *The Thinker* is not only an artwork, but also a mirroring device to reflect our inner concerns and worries. It is a three dimensional impressionism art!

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## Appendix A- Illustrations

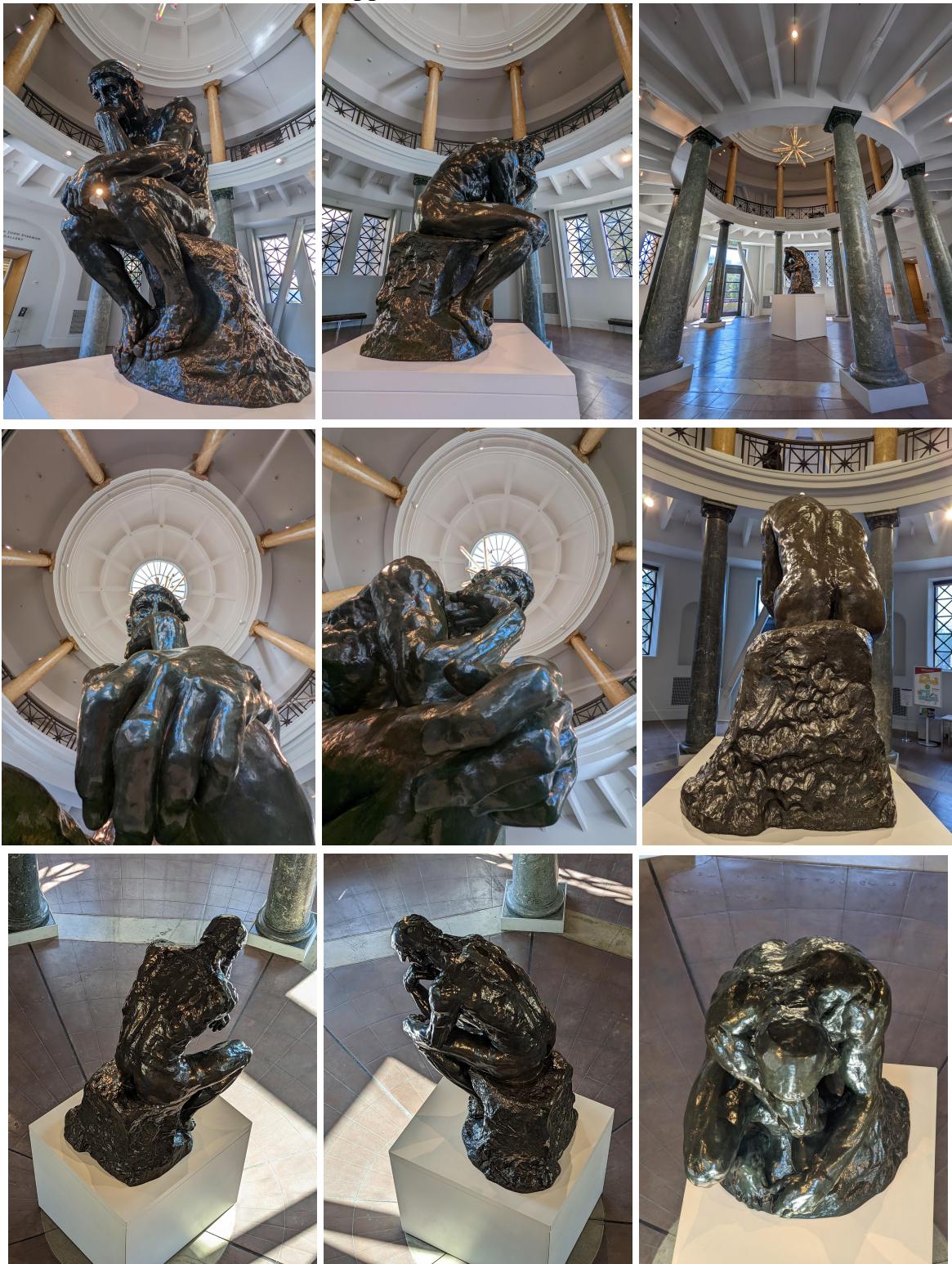
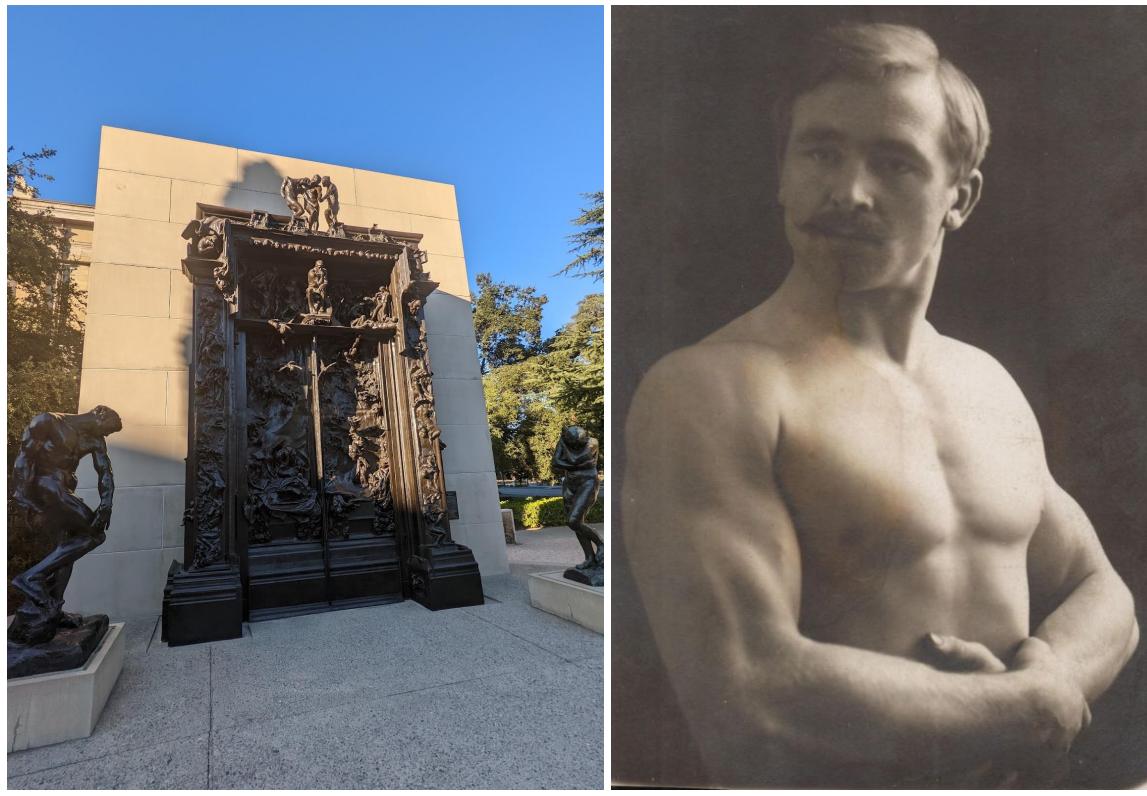


Fig. 1-9: *The Thinker* (French: *Le Penseur*) displayed inside the octagon-shaped Susan & John Diekman Gallery in the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.



Fig. 10-12: *The Thinker* (French: *Le Penseur*) displayed inside the octagon-shaped Susan & John Diekman Gallery in the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.



Left: Fig. 13: *The Gates of Hell* in the B. Gerald Cantor Rodin Sculpture Garden, outside the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

Right: Fig. 14: French boxing champion and wrestler *Jean Baud* was modeled for *The Thinker*.



Fig. 15 & Fig. 16: Head of the original version of *The Thinker* which first casted with a Florentine cap, casted in 1884. National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.



Fig 17 & Fig 18: *The Thinker* and the author in the West Building of National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



Fig. 19 & Fig. 20: The Thinker and the author in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig 21: The Thinker displayed in the courtyard of Legend of Honor, San Francisco.



Fig. 22: Pierre Choumoff, Séverine's Speech at Rodin's Funeral,  
24 November 1917; Musée Rodin, Paris, Ph. 1008, © Musée Rodin.



Left: Fig. 23: Clay of The Thinker.

Right: Fig. 24: Plaster of The Thinker, the smaller version for The Gates of Hell.

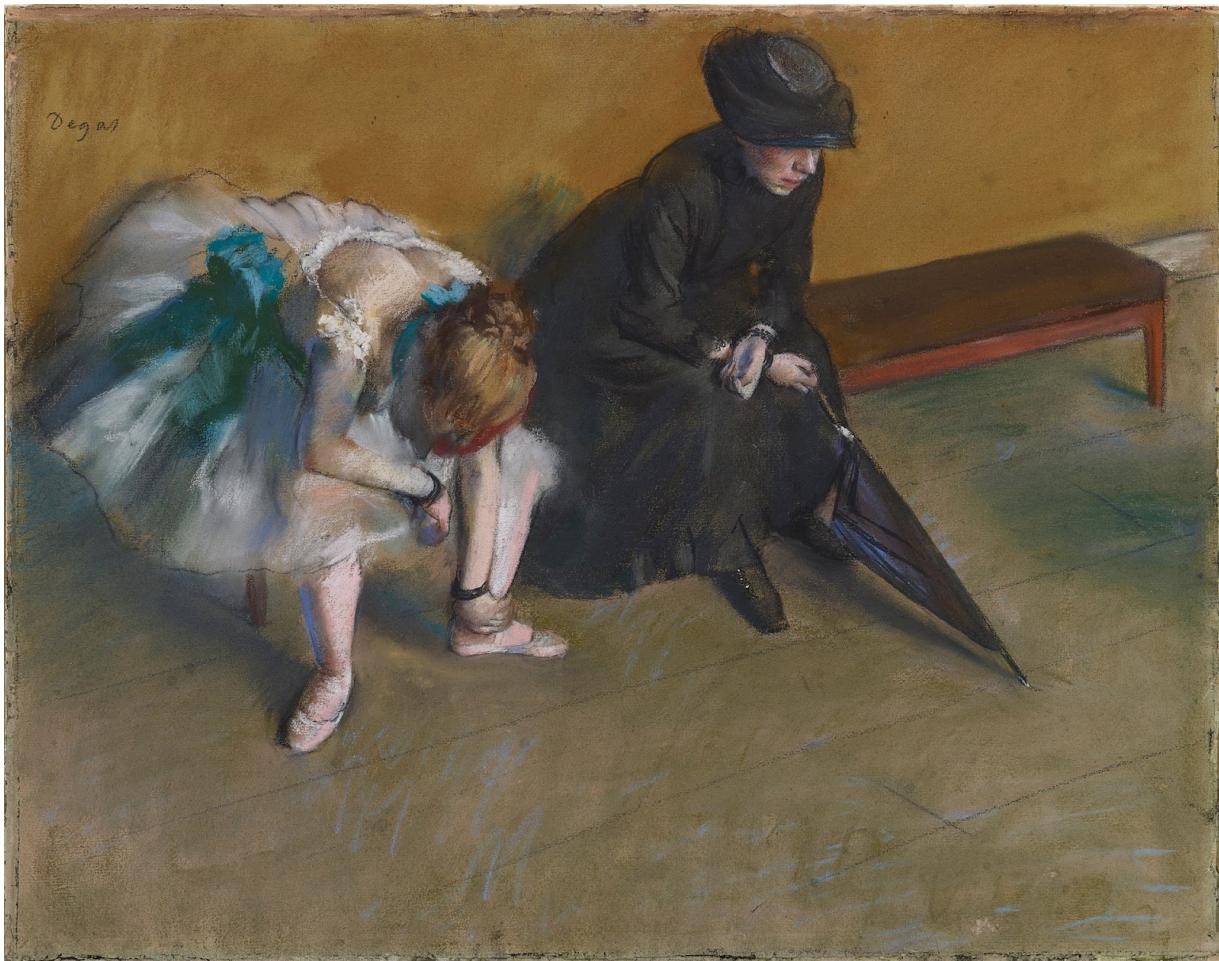


Fig. 25: *Waiting*, 1880–1882, Edgar Degas.