**Rodin, François Auguste René [Auguste] (1840-1917)**

Auguste Rodin is a seminal figure in the history of modern sculpture. He first came to the attention of critics in 1877, when the naturalism of his statue the *Age of Bronze* polarised debate and led to accusations of its having been cast from life. Rodin nevertheless received State support, including the commission for *The Gates of Hell* (1880 onwards)*.* Conceived as a door for a proposed decorative arts museum, Rodin peopled his design with dozens of small-scale figures. Many of these were reproduced as isolated works in marble, plaster and bronze, including *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*. Individually and collectively, these contributed to Rodin’s reputation as the father of modern sculpture. They demonstrate his interest in capturing unrestricted movement in the human form; the use of the fragment and assemblage; the non-finito or unfinished work; and a new direction in portraiture that focused on personality over form. Rodin received the support of modern writers including Roger Marx, Gustave Geffroy, Octave Mirbeau and Rainer Maria Rilke. His reputation declined after his death, largely as a result of changing approaches to reproduction, and was revived in the 1960s through the efforts of scholars including Albert Elsen.

Auguste Rodin was born in Paris, France, in 1840, the son of a police clerk. Aged 13 he entered the Petite Ecole, an art school for industry, and later attempted, unsuccessfully, to enter the Ecole des beaux-arts, the official school of fine art. His education ‘outside’ the fine-art system –evening classes, visits to galleries, zoos and botanical gardens, working in the studios of established sculptors – echoed that of many nineteenth-century sculptors. With the fine art route closed to him, Rodin supported himself within industry. This experience had a formative influence on his sculptural development. He was taught how to model in depth, and learnt techniques common to the decorative arts – the use of the fragment and assemblage – which he would later deploy to radical effect in his fine art sculpture practice, reworking and recombining his plaster casts to create new works, leaving the joint lines visible.

In 1875-6 Rodin travelled to Italy to discover the ‘secrets’ of Michelangelo. On his return he completed a standing male nude, which he submitted in 1877 to the Cercle Artistique in Brussels as *The* *Vanquished*, and to the Paris Salon as the *Age of Bronze*. A scandal ensued, when some critics accused Rodin of having modelled the figure from life. He had studied a soldier, preferring the natural movement and gestures of non-professional models. *The Gates of Hell* is peopled with hundreds of figures who convey uninhibited movement as they writhe, embrace and fall.

Rodin also rethought portraiture by attempting to capture the intellect and character of the individual, rather than their bodily form. Examples include a monument to the writer Victor Hugo (1889), whose nakedness was derided as inappropriate to a national hero. His monument to the writer Honoré de Balzac is almost abstract - a visionary’s head above a monumental body shrouded in his dressing gown, concealing his erect virility. The *Balzac* is also an example of how Rodin inspired photographers to experiment with the artistic potential of photography through sculpture. Rodin also reconfigured the plinth, using a variety of pedestals for smaller works, and suggesting unsuccessfully that the figures for the monument to the Burghers of Calais (1884-95) stand individually on the ground, without bases; and be raised on a high pedestal for its copy in London.

Rodin directly influenced the next generation of sculptors. Antoine Bourdelle and Constantin Brancusi both worked in his studios and would become leading proponents of modern sculpture. He also protected his legacy by persuading the French State to designate his home and studio as a museum. Initially this partly contributed to a fall in his reputation, as his will authorised the casting of bronzes from his plasters; but in 1978 this was limited to editions of twelve. In the 1960s, critics and scholars revived interest in Rodin, largely through determining his contribution to modern sculpture.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Illustrations**

Fig. 1, Coburn Alvin Langdon, *Rodin*, photograph, 1908, musée d’Orsay. (C) Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Alexis Brandt

<http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=48&FP=3036725&E=2K1KTSJQO8UB8&SID=2K1KTSJQO8UB8&New=T&Pic=45&SubE=2C6NU0OUSN5P>

Fig. 2, Edward Steichen, *Balzac* *– The Silhouette, 4am*, 1991, heliogravure, musée d’Orsay. (C) The Estate of Edward Steichen, Crédit photographique : (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski.

<http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=38&FP=3032031&E=2K1KTSJQO2KQ8&SID=2K1KTSJQO2KQ8&New=T&Pic=8&SubE=2C6NU04M87FS>