

A black and white photograph of Auguste Rodin's famous bronze statue, 'The Thinker'. The statue depicts a nude male figure, seated on a large, craggy rock. He is shown in a state of deep contemplation, with his right hand resting on his chin and cheek, and his left hand resting on his knee. His legs are crossed at the ankles. The statue is set against a plain, light gray background. The lighting highlights the muscular details of the figure's torso and the texture of the rock.

Auguste

RODIN

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Auguste Rodin

2021

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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.

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



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

The Gates of Hell, 1880-1917.
Plaster, 600 x 380 x 97.5 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.

Third maquette for *The Gates of Hell*,
1880.
Plaster, 109.8 x 73.7 x 28.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Project for *The Gates of Hell*, c. 1880.
Graphite touched up with pen
and ink (sketch for the composition),
30.5 x 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.



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

The Gates of Hell, 1880-1917.
Bronze, 635 x 400 x 85 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



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

Jamb of the *Gates of Hell*, c. 1885.
Clay modelling.
Musée Rodin, Paris.
(pp. 18, 19)





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.

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.

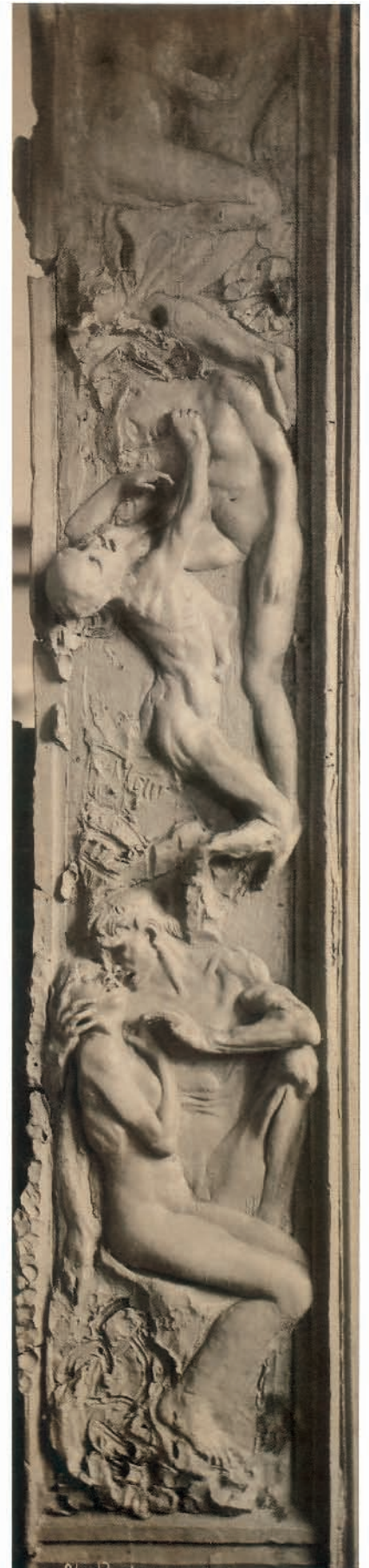
In fact, Rodin was possessed of a patience so deep it almost makes him anonymous; a quiet, considered serenity reminiscent of the patience and goodness of nature, which begins with next to nothing only to traverse the long path to abundance in silent solemnity. In the same way, Rodin was not presumptuous 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





The Gates of Hell (detail), 1880-1917.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Gates of Hell (detail), 1880-1917.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



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.

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.

The Monument to the Burgers of Calais, 1889.
Bronze, 217 x 255 x 177 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





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

Head of Pierre de Wissant,
c. 1885-1886 (?).
Terracotta, 28.6 x 20 x 22 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

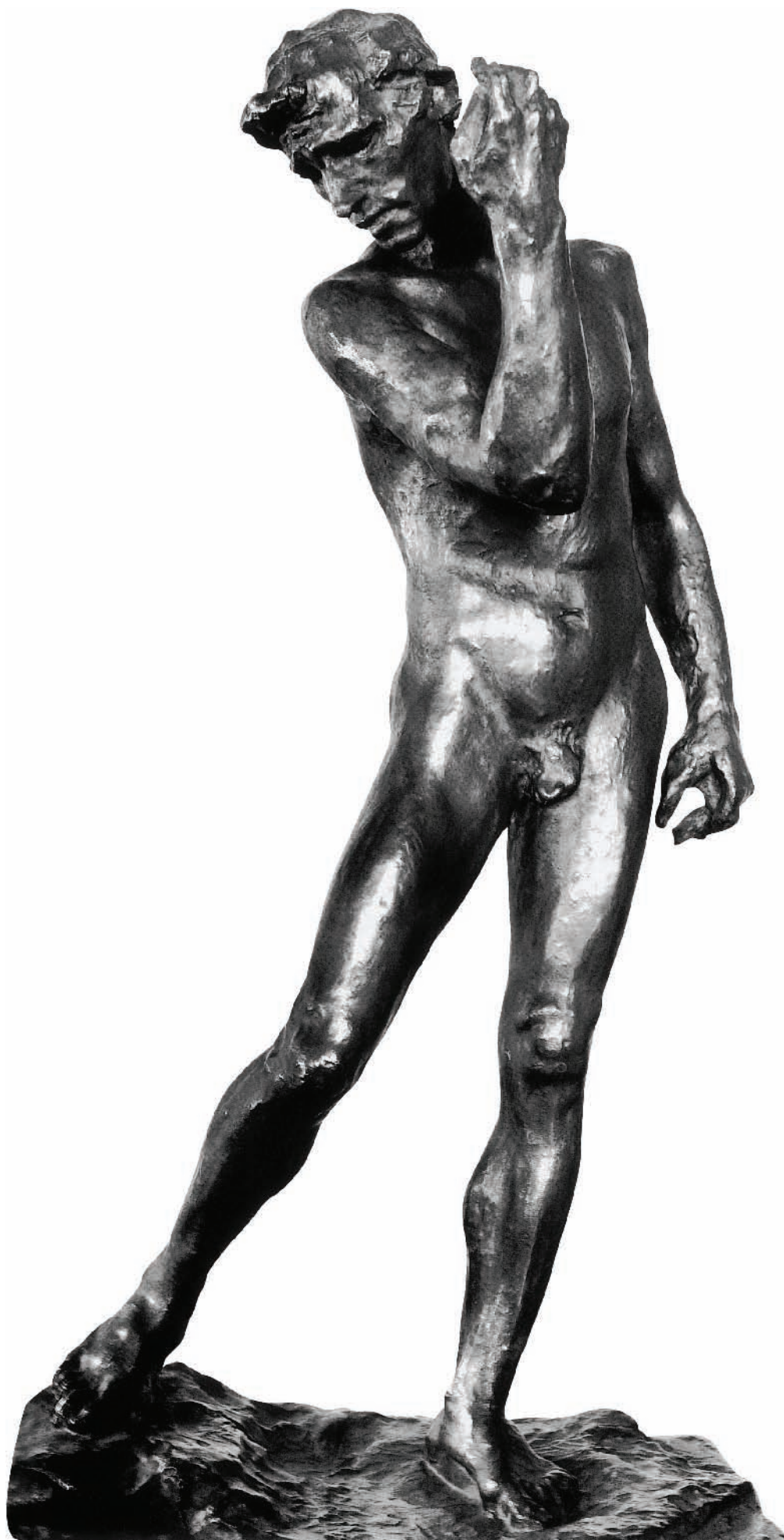




Jean de Fiennes, dressed, 1885-1886.
Bronze, 208.3 x 121.9 x 96.5 cm.
Musé Rodin, Paris.

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





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.

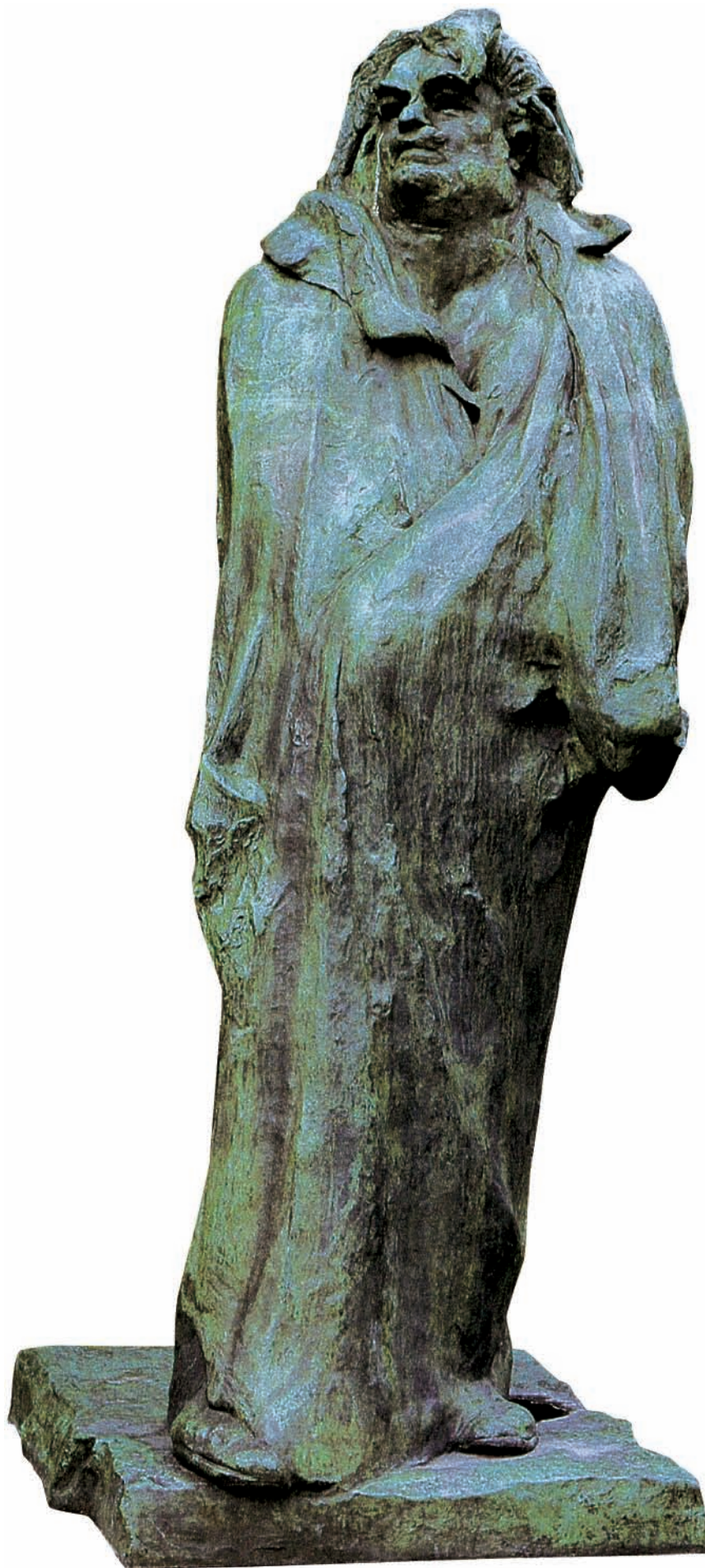
From Dante he came to Baudelaire. This was no tribunal of judgment, no poet ascending on the hand of a shadow to heaven. Here, rather, was a simple human being, a mere mortal who suffered like everyone, lifting his voice high above the din, as if to save us all from destruction. And there were sections 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,

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





Balzac in Dominican Robe,
1891-1892.
Plaster, 108 x 53.7 x 38.3 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

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

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.

Two works mark this period of growing maturity. At the beginning stands the head of *The Man with the Broken Nose* (p. 41), 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

Balzac, Nude Study C, 1892-1893.
Bronze, 127 x 56 x 62.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.







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

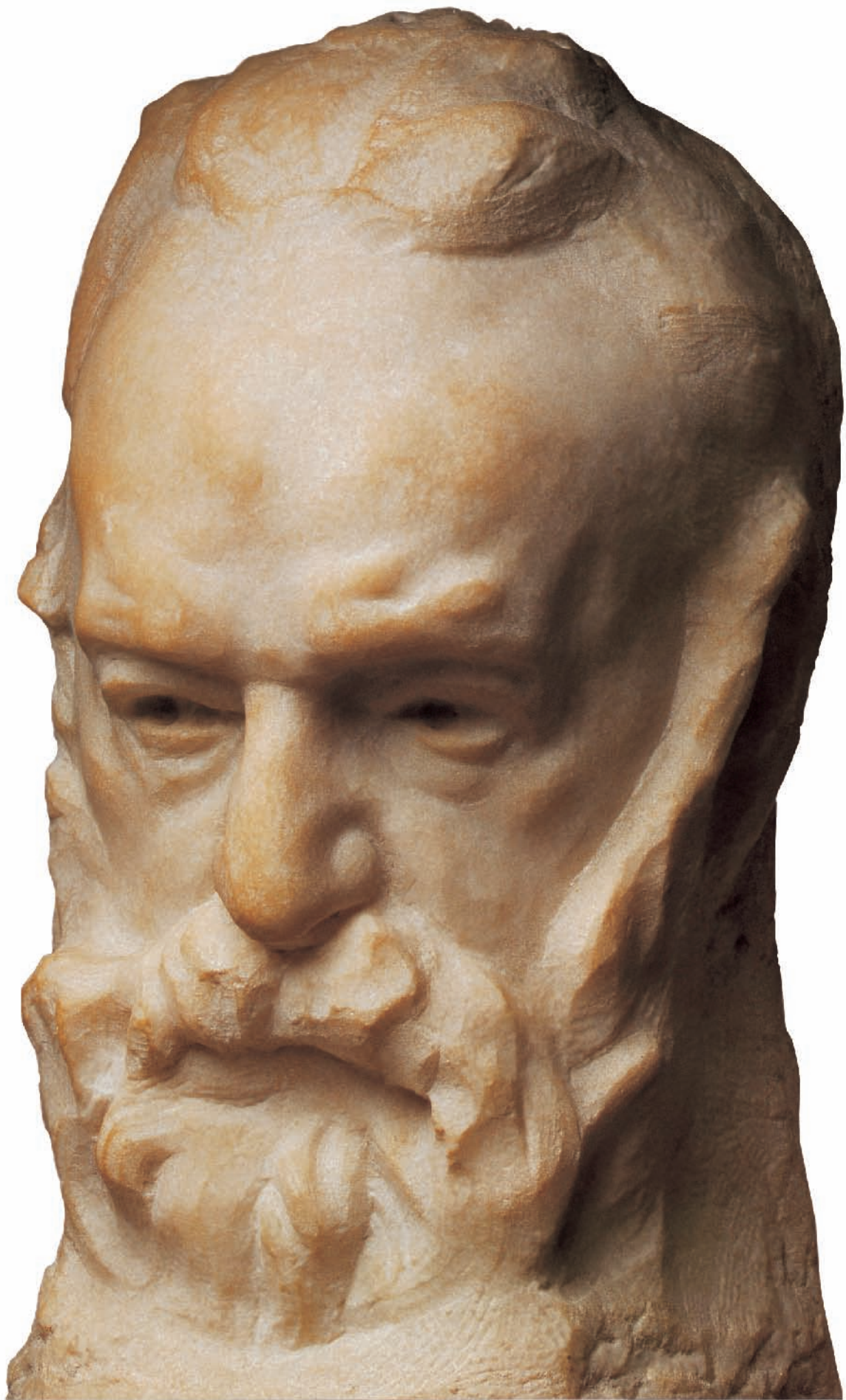
Balzac's Dressing Gown, c. 1895
Plastered cloth, 148 x 57.5 x 42 cm.
Musée Rodin, Meudon.



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

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







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.

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

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

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

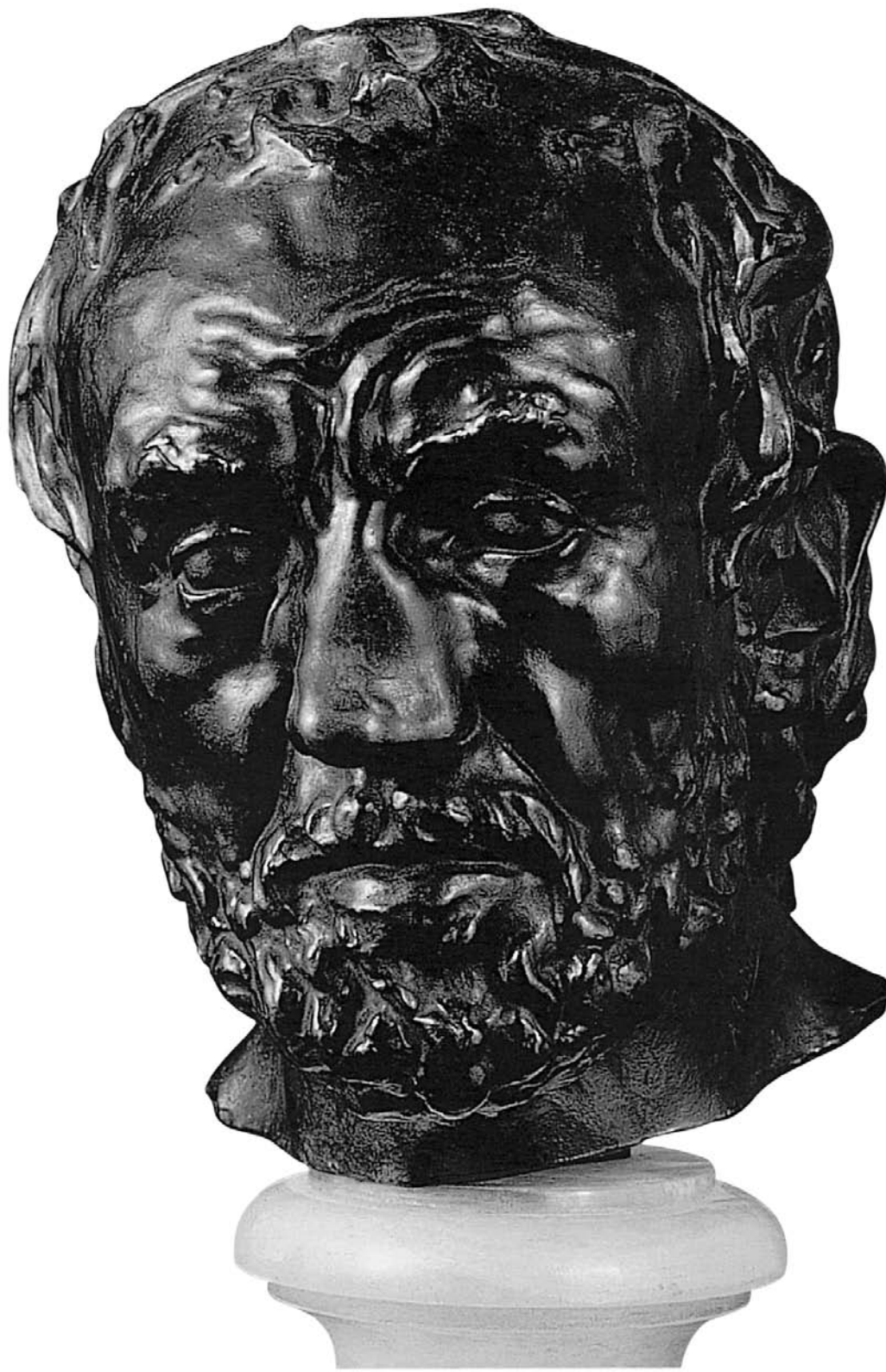
a vessel. Currents flowed through gods at rest, and those who stood seemed to embody motion, like a fountain rising from the stone and then falling back again, covering it with innumerable waves. Motion was never at odds with the spirit of sculpture (which means simply the essence of things); it was 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*" (Sovereign 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 x 18 x 23 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Thinker, 1879-1880.
Plaster.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Thinker, 1879-1880.
Plaster.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Thinker, 1881.
Bronze, 71.5 x 40 x 58 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. 16-17, 24, 27, 28) setting out on their arduous journey, and all his walkers seem to prepare the way for the great challenging stride of *Balzac* (p. 33). 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* (p. 67), 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; p. 69), 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. One

The Age of Bronze, 1875-1876.
Bronze, 175.3 x 67.5 x 52.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





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

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





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.

Bust of the Sculptor Jules Dalou, 1883.
Bronze, 52.2 x 42.9 x 26.7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Georges Clemenceau, 1911.
Bronze, 50 x 32 x 25 cm.
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

Saint John the Baptist, 1880.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Saint John the Baptist, 1880.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





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.

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. 82, 83) lies in this wise and eminently fair distribution of life.

Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, 1882.
Terracotta, 48 x 45 x 34 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



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. 70, 71) rises like walls around a garden. One of the copies of this marble piece belonged to Eugène Carrière. In the quiet twilight of his home this luminous stone lived like a spring, enlivened by an unchanging motion, always the same rise and fall of magical powers. A girl kneels. Her lovely body leans back gently. Her right arm stretches back, and her searching hand has found her foot. These three lines, from which no path leads out into the world, enclose her entire life and all its mystery. The stone beneath elevates her even as she kneels. And suddenly we recognize in the bearing of this girl, in the lethargy, reverie, or solitude into which she has fallen, the sacred gesture of a primeval goddess from a distant, terrible cult. The woman's head leans forward slightly. With an expression of tenderness, nobility, and patience, she looks down as if from the height of a silent night, down at the man whose face is buried in her breasts as if in myriad blossoms. He too kneels, but more deeply, deep in the stone. His hands lie behind him like worthless, empty things. The right hand is open, letting us look in. A mysterious greatness emanates from this group. As is so often the case with Rodin, one hardly dares ascribe meaning to it. There are thousands. Thoughts pass over this sculpture like shadows, and in the wake of each of them it rises new and enigmatic, lucid and nameless.

Duchesse de Choiseul, born Claire Coudert, 1911.
Marble, 49 x 50.3 x 31.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Tower of Labour, 1894.
Plaster, 151 x 64.5 x 67.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Blessings, 1894.
Marble, 30 x 22 x 20 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Something of the mood of a Purgatory lives in this work. A heaven is near, but not yet attained; a hell is near, and not yet forgotten. And here too, all this radiance comes from the contact of two bodies, and from the contact of the woman with herself. The colossal *Gates of Hell* (p. 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21), which Rodin worked on for twenty solitary years and which was not cast until 1917, is still another rendering of this great theme: the contact of living, moving planes. Proceeding with the exploration of the movement and the union of these planes at one and the same time, Rodin searched for bodies touching at many places, bodies whose contact was more intense, stronger, and less restrained. The more points of contact there were for two bodies, the more impatiently they came together like chemicals of great affinity, and the more stable and organic was the new whole they made together. Memories of Dante appeared. *Ugolino* and the pilgrims themselves. Dante and Virgil come together. The throng of the voluptuous, above which the greedy gesture of avarice loomed like a withering tree. Centaurs, giants, and monsters rose up before him, along with fauns and their consorts, and all the savage godbeasts of the pre-Christian forest. And he created. He realized all the figures and forms of Dante's dream, lifting them up from the moving depths of his own memory and giving to each in turn the faint redemption of material existence. Hundreds of figures and groups came about in this way. But the movements he discovered in the words of the poet belonged to a different time. They awoke in the artist who brought them to life the knowledge of thousands of other gestures, gestures of accumulation, loss, suffering, and resignation, and all those gestures that had evolved in the meantime. His tireless hands went on and on, beyond the world of the Florentine poet, to ever new gestures and figures.

This earnest, focused worker, who had never searched for material and who desired no achievement beyond what his increasingly mature art might bring, passed in this way through all the dramas of life: deep nights of love were revealed to him in all their profundity, that space of darkness, lust, and sorrow in which, as in an enduring heroic world, clothing was unknown, faces were extinguished, and bodies came into their own. He came to the great confusion of this struggle with white hot senses, as a seeker of life, and what he saw was just that: life. It didn't close in on him, petty and oppressive. It spread out, leaving the cramped atmosphere of the alcoves far behind. Here was life, a thousand-fold in every moment, in longing and sorrow, in madness and fear, in loss and gain. Here was a boundless desire, a thirst so great that it dried up all the water in the world down to a single drop. Here there were no denials or lies, and as for the gestures of giving and taking, here they were honest and great. There was vice and depravity, damnation and bliss alike, and one understood suddenly that a world which concealed and covered this, a world which acted as if it were otherwise, could only be poor. But it was not otherwise. This other story ran alongside the whole history of humanity. It knew no disguise or convention, and paid no heed to rank or class. It knew only struggle. This other story had its own development as well. Instinct had become longing, and the desire of men and women for each other had become the passion of human relations. And this is the way it appears in the work of Rodin.



General Lynch on Column, after 1886.
Plaster, 180 x 37.2 x 20 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

General Lynch on Column (detail),
after 1886.
Plaster, 180 x 37.2 x 20 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Madame de Morla Vicuña,
between 1884 and 1888.
Marble, 56.9 x 49.9 x 37 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

The Hand of God, 1896.
Marble, 94 x 82.5 x 54.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.







There is still the eternal battle of the sexes, but here the woman is no longer an animal who submits or is overpowered. She too is awake and animated by desire, as if they had both joined forces to search for their souls. The man rising to quietly seek another in the night is like a treasure hunter who hopes to uncover the great happiness that is so necessary at the crossroads of sex. And in all this vice, in all the unnatural lust, in all the desperate and doomed attempts to ascribe an eternal meaning to existence, there is something of the inexplicable longing that animates great poets. The hunger of humanity extends beyond itself here, and hands reach for eternity. Eyes open, looking death in the face without any fear. A hopeless heroism develops here too, whose glory comes and goes like a smile, like a rose that blossoms and withers. Here are the storms of desire and the calm of expectation; here are the dreams that become actions, and the actions that fade into dreams.

Power is won and lost here as if on an enormous gaming table. All this can be found in Rodin's work. It was here that this man who had experienced so much would discover the richness and abundance of life. Bodies whose every part was will, and mouths taking on the form of cries that seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth. He found the gestures of primitive gods, the beauty and grace of the animals, the intoxication of ancient dances, and the motions of forgotten religious rites, all of it strangely linked together with the new gestures that had come about in the long years since art turned away, blind to all these revelations. He found these new gestures particularly interesting. They were impatient. Like a man who searches widely for some object, becoming more and more desperate, distracted, and hurried, wreaking destruction all around him, accumulating things as if he could force them to join in his search, but sowing disorder in the process - these are the gestures of a humanity that can not find meaning, a humanity that has become more impatient and nervous, more frantic and feverish. All the questions of existence lie unsettled around these gestures. But at the same time their movements have become more hesitant.

They no longer have the gymnastic and decisive directness with which our predecessors grasped for everything. They don't resemble those movements preserved in ancient sculptures, those gestures whose births and deaths were everything. Countless transitions had intruded between these two simple moments, and it soon became clear that modern life, in its actions and in its inability to act, was to be found precisely in these intermediary states. Grasping had become different, as had waving, releasing, and holding. They all were possessed of much more experience, but also much more ignorance; much more cowardice and a constant assault on objects; much more regret for what had been lost, much more calculation, judgment, and reflection, and at the same time less spontaneity. Rodin created these gestures. He made them from one or many forms, shaping them into things in his way. There were hundreds and hundreds of these figures, many just slightly larger than his hands, to carry the life of all the passions, the blossoming of all lust and the burden of all burdens. He created bodies that touch everywhere, clinging together fiercely like dogs in a death grip, falling as one thing into the depths. There are bodies that listen like faces and bodies that hold up like arms,

The Cathedral, 1908.
Stone, 64 x 31.8 x 35 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Assemblage: left hand of Pierre de Wissant and Mask of Camille Claudel, between 1885 and 1917.
Plaster, 28.5 x 24.5 x 29.7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Camille Claudel with Cap, 1884.
Plaster, 25.1 x 15.1 x 18.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

chains of bodies, garlands, and tendrils, and figures like grapes, heavy with the sweetness of sin rising from the roots of pain. Leonardo fused human beings together with similar force and majesty in his grandiose representation of the end of the world. Here as there we find figures hurling themselves into the abyss in the hope of escaping great misery, and others crushing the heads of their children to prevent them from growing into the pain.

The army of these figures had become far too prodigious for all to fit into the frame and wings of *The Gates of Hell*. Rodin made a number of selections. He excluded everything that was too solitary to submit to the great totality, everything that wasn't entirely necessary in this context. He let the figures and groups find their own places; he observed the life of the people he had created, listening and letting them all act



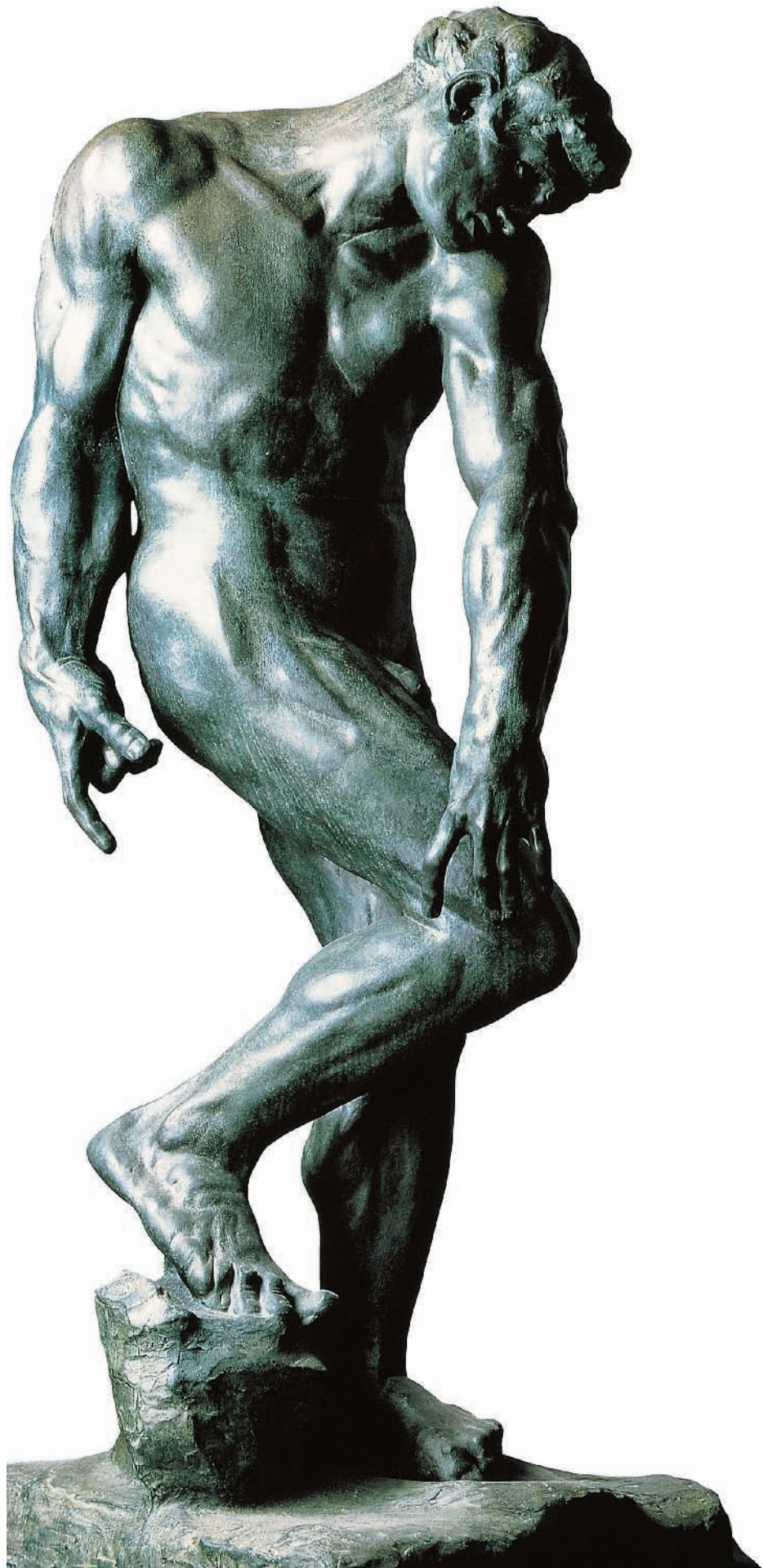


Genius of Eternal Rest, 1899-1903.
Plaster, 195.5 x 106.5 x 95 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



according to their own will. This is the way the world of these *Gates* gradually came about. Its surfaces, to which the sculpted forms would be attached, began to come to life. The agitation of the figures melted into the surface in reliefs of decreasing depth. Within the frame there is an upward motion from both sides, a pulling and lifting-up, while the dominant motion on the wings of the gate is a falling glide and rush. The wings recede slightly, their upper border separated from the protruding edge of the cross frame by a rather large surface. In front of this, set within the enclosed stillness of the space, is the figure of *The Thinker* (pp. 42, 43), the man who sees the enormity and vast horror of the scene because he thinks it. He sits in mute absorption, heavy with pictures and thoughts, and all his strength (which is the strength of a man of action) goes into this thinking. His whole body has become a skull, all the blood in his veins a brain. He is the center of this *Gate*, although there are three more male figures standing above him on top of the frame. Because of the depth of the gate, they seem to emerge from a great distance. Their heads bow together and three arms stretch

Woman Combing Her Hair, c. 1900.
Plaster, 25.7 x 14.5 x 14.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Adam, 1880.
Bronze, 194.3 x 74.9 x 77.5 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.



Eve, 1881.
Bronze.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.

forward, coming together and pointing down to the same spot, into the same abyss, which draws them down with its weight. *The Thinker*, on the other hand, must bear this weight within.

Many of the groups and sculptures to which these *Gates* gave rise are strikingly beautiful. It is impossible to enumerate them all, just as it is impossible to describe them. Rodin himself once said that he would have to talk for a year to repeat a single one of his works with words. But perhaps it is enough to say that like the small animal figures left by antiquity, Rodin's little sculptures of plaster, bronze, and stone give the unmistakable impression of great things. In Rodin's studio there is a small Greek cast of a panther (the original is in the medallion case in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris). Looking under its body, into the space formed by four lithe legs, one almost has the sense of looking into the depths of an Indian rock temple. In this way Rodin's work expands to great proportions. The same thing is true of his little sculptures. In giving them so many layers, so infinitely many complete and perfectly defined planes, he makes them great. The air wafts around them as it does around rocks. Where there is upward motion the sky rises with them, and the flight of their fall brings the stars down as well.

It may well be that *Danaïd* (p. 103), that figure flinging herself from a kneeling position into her flowing hair, belongs to the same period. Walking slowly around this piece of marble is an extraordinary experience: the long, long way around the rich curve of the back, to the face losing itself in the stone as if in a great weeping, to the hand like a last flower, speaking softly of life deep in the eternal ice of the block. And *The Illusion*, *Sister of Icarus* (p. 80), that dazzling embodiment of a long, helpless fall. And the magnificent group called *Man and His Thought* (p.153). If we were to interpret this representation of a man who kneels and awakens with a mere touch of his forehead the soft form of a woman still bound to the stone, we would have to begin with the expression of indivisibility with which thought clings to the man's brow: for in the end it is only his thought that takes on life before him, and right behind it is stone. The head, too, is related to this, rising silent and meditative from the great block of stone on which the chin rests - the *thought*, this piece of clarity, being, and face that rises slowly from the heavy sleep of enduring staleness. And then there is the *Caryatid* (p.150). This is no longer an upright figure bearing the burden of a stone with ease or great difficulty, as if she had taken her position only after the stone was fixed. This is the nude figure of woman, kneeling, bent over, compressed within herself and formed completely by the hand of a burden whose weight sinks into all her limbs like a perpetual fall. The stone rests on even the smallest part of this body like a will that is greater than it, older and more powerful, yet the body is fated eternally to carry the weight. It bears this burden as we bear the impossible in dreams, finding no way out. There is bearing even in the deflatedness and palpable failure of this body, and when exhaustion overtakes it again, forcing it to recline, there will be bearing even in its reclining, the bearing of a burden without end. This is the *Caryatid*. If we wished to do so, we could associate most of Rodin's works with ideas, explaining and

Meditation without Arms
(*The Inner Voice*), 1880s.
Bronze, 146 x 59 x 46 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Eternal Idol, 1889.
Plaster, 73.2 x 59.2 x 41.1cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Eternal Idol, 1889.
Bronze, 17 x 14 x 7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.









encompassing them. There are those for whom simple contemplation is an unusual and difficult path to beauty, and for them there are other ways, detours leading to meanings: noble, great, and fully formed. It is as if the infinite goodness and truth of all these figures – the perfect balance of all their movements, the wonderful inner justice of their proportions, their being-imbued-with-life – as if all that makes them beautiful endows them as well with the power to be inimitable realizations of the material the master drew upon when he named them. With Rodin the material is never bound to the art object like an animal in a tree. It lives somewhere near the thing; it lives from it, like the custodian of a museum. Much is to be learned by calling on Rodin's people, but if we can do without their knowledge and observe the work alone and undisturbed, we experience even more.

Where the first impulse came from some material, where the source of inspiration was an ancient legend, part of a poem, a historical scene, or some actual person, once Rodin begins to work on this material, it is transformed progressively into something objective and nameless. Translated into the language of the hands, the resulting demands all have new meaning, which could only be realized in stone. This process of forgetting and transforming the original material is often anticipated by Rodin's drawings. He developed his own means of expression in this medium as well, and it is this that makes these sketches (there are several hundred of them) independent and original revelations of his individuality.

There are watercolors with astonishingly strong effects of light and shadow from this early period. The famous *L'Homme au taureau*, so reminiscent of Rembrandt, is an excellent example, as are the *Head of the Young John the Baptist* and the shrieking mask of the *Genius of War*; they all can be seen as studies that helped the artist recognize the life of planes and their relation to the atmosphere. Then there are figures drawn with a hunted certainty, forms filled out in all their contours, shaped with many quick pencil strokes, and others enclosed in the melody of a single vibrating outline, from which rises a gesture of unforgettable purity. Typical of these are the drawings Rodin made to illustrate *Les Fleurs du Mal* for a tasteful collector. We say nothing when we speak of his profound understanding of Baudelaire's poetry, but we begin to say more when we recall how the perfect completion of these poems allows for no addition, no heightening of effect. And yet we feel both enhancement and heightening when we see how Rodin's lines complement the work. This is a fine indication of the enchanting beauty of these drawings. The sketch placed beside the poem titled "La mort des pauvres" extends beyond these great verses with a gesture of such simple and flourishing greatness that it seems to fill the whole world from dawn to dusk.

The same is true of the dry-point etchings; here the course of infinitely delicate lines gives the appearance of the outer contour of a beautiful glass object, which, defined clearly at any given moment, flows beyond the essence of a reality. And finally there are those strange documents of the momentary, those chronicles of all that is imperceptibly transitory. Rodin assumed that if a model's most inconspicuous and unassuming movements were captured quickly, they would provide an unfamiliar intensity of

The Helmet-Maker's Wife,
between 1880 and 1883.
Bronze, 50 x 30 x 26.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Centauress, c. 1887.
Bronze, 40 x 45 x 18 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Call to Arms, 1879.
Bronze, 112 x 58 x 50 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



expression, because we are not accustomed to observing them with keen, active attentiveness. Never losing sight of his model and leaving the paper entirely to his quick, experienced hand, he drew a vast number of gestures that are rarely seen and almost always neglected. The strength of expression emanating from them was prodigious; movements were linked in ways that had been overlooked and unrecognized, and they had all the directness, strength, and warmth of pure animal life. A brush of ochre, passed quickly and with varying emphasis through these contours, modeled the enclosed surface with such unbelievable force that the plastic figures looked to be created of baked clay. Once again, a whole new world had been discovered, filled with nameless life, and the depths over which all others had passed yielded its waters to he who had prophesied with the willow rod.

This practice of rendering the subject first in drawings was also an important part of the preparations with which Rodin proceeded slowly and carefully to the portraits. For while it surely is inappropriate to see a form of Impressionism in his sculpture, the abundance of impressions, and the way they are collected with such precision and boldness, does provide him with a wealth of material from which he selects what is important and essential, only to unite it all in a mature synthesis. Moving from the bodies, which he researches and forms, to the faces, it must have sometimes seemed as if he were stepping from a windy, momentous expanse into a room filled with people: here everything is crowded and dark, and the mood of an interior reigns beneath the arching brows and in the shadow of the mouth. While there is always change and the rhythm of waves in Rodin's bodies, a constant ebb and flow, the faces evoke the air. They are like rooms where much has happened, where there has been joy and fear, sorrow and hope. None of these experiences is gone entirely; one does not replace another, but each takes its place among the others, remaining to fade like a flower in water. And he who comes from outside, from the great wind, brings breadth into the room.

The mask of *Man with the Broken Nose* (p. 41) was the first portrait Rodin created. His distinct way of encountering a face is already fully developed in this early work. We sense his unbounded devotion to what was before him, his reverence for every line drawn by fate, his trust in life, which creates even where it disfigures. He created *The Man with the Broken Nose* with a kind of blind faith, without asking who the man was, this man whose life passed again in his hands. He made him just as God made the first man, without intending to produce anything but life itself, nameless life. But he would return to the faces of humanity, always more knowledgeable, more experienced, more magnanimous. He could no longer see their features without thinking of the days that had worked on them, of that great army of craftsmen constantly at work on a face, as if it could never be finished. In this way the quietly conscientious reproduction of life became for the mature artist – initially hesitant and experimental, then increasingly certain and bold – an interpretation of the script that covered these faces. He gave no play to his imagination, and invented nothing. Not for a moment did he disdain the difficult development of his craft. It would have been easy to ascend somehow and

Pallas with Parthenon, 1896.
Marble, 47 x 38.7 x 31 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





The Little Fairy of the Waters, 1903.
Marble, 41.5 x 66.5 x 58.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Sitting Female Torso,
between 1890 and 1891.
Plaster, 13.8 x 9.1 x 8.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Illusion, Sister of Icarus,
before 1910.
Marble, 41.7 x 85 x 51.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

surpass it. As always, he kept step beside it, going the requisite distance, like the farmer behind his plow. But while he made his furrows, he reflected on the profundity of the land and the sky above it, on the passage of the winds and the falling rains, on everything that was and did harm and passed and returned, and on all that would not cease to be. And now, stronger and less confused by the multiplicity, he felt himself capable of recognizing the eternal in all this, that which made suffering also good, that which made expectation of hard times, and beauty of pain. This vision, which began with the portraits, grew deeper and deeper into his work. It is the last stage, the outer circle of his vast development. It began slowly. Rodin walked this new path with infinite caution. Again he proceeded from plane to plane, following and listening to nature. It was nature itself that showed him the places he knew more about than met the eye. When he went to work and created a great simplification from many small details in disarray, the result resembled what Christ had done when people approached him with unclear questions and he cleansed them of their sins with a sublime parable. He fulfilled nature's own intentions. He completed things that were helpless in their becoming, and



he revealed hidden relationships just as the evening of a hazy day reveals mountains extending into the distance like rolling waves.

Filled with the animating burden of his vast knowledge, he looked like a seer into the faces of those living around him. This gives an extraordinarily precise clarity to his portraits, but also that prophetic greatness that rises to an indescribable perfection in the images of Victor Hugo and Balzac. For Rodin, creating a portrait meant searching for eternity in any given face, that piece of eternity with which it took part in the great life of eternal things. Just as we hold a thing up to the sky in order to understand its form more purely and simply, these images are all moved, if ever so slightly, from their moorings into the future. This is not what is commonly called beautification, nor would it be accurate to speak of giving something characteristic expression. It is more a matter of separating the enduring from the transitory, passing judgment, being just. Apart from the etchings, Rodin's work includes a vast number of perfect and masterly portraits. There are busts made of plaster, bronze, marble, and sandstone, heads of baked clay and masks that were simply left to dry. There are portraits of women from

The Fall of Icarus,
between 1880 and 1917.
Plaster, 47 x 37.4 x 20.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Kiss, 1888-1889.
Marble, 183.6 x 110.5 x 118.3 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Kiss (detail), 1888-1889.
Marble, 183.6 x 110.5 x 118.3 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.







Paolo and Francesca, 1987.
Bronze, 30.1 x 60.4 x 30 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



all the periods of his work. The famous bust in the Luxembourg Museum¹ is one of the earliest. She is filled with an uncommonly beautiful life and possessed of a distinctly feminine charm, but many later works surpass her in the simplicity and concentration of their planes. This is perhaps the only one of Rodin's works that does not owe its beauty primarily to the virtues of its sculptor; for this portrait also lives in part from the spirit of a grace that has characterized French sculpture for centuries. This piece is distinguished vaguely by the elegance that marks even bad sculpture in the French tradition; it isn't entirely free of that gallant representation of the *belle femme*, which was soon left behind by Rodin's assiduousness and incisiveness. But we would do well to remember that this inherited sensibility was also to be overcome; he had to suppress an innate facility in order to begin anew as a pauper. Not that he needed to stop being French; after all, the great masters of the cathedrals were French as well.

The later images of women have a different, more deeply grounded and less common beauty. We should perhaps mention that these later portraits were mostly of foreigners, and often of Americans. There is wonderful work in some of these portraits, stone as pure and untouchable as antique cameos. There are faces whose smiles are nowhere defined; they play softly among the features, rising like a veil with every breath. Lips close mysteriously and eyes wide with dreams look beyond everything, into an eternal moonlit night. And yet Rodin always inclines toward a representation of the woman's face as a part of her beautiful body, as if her eyes were the eyes of her body and her mouth the mouth of her body. Where he sees and creates in this organic way, the face often takes on such a strong and moving expression of unexpected life that it completely supercedes the portrait as a whole (even if the whole figure appears to be more polished).

It is different with the images of men. It is easier to think of a man's essence being concentrated in his face. We can even imagine that there are moments – those of quiet as well as those of inner excitement – when all of life is captured in a man's face. Rodin chooses such moments when he decides to do masculine portraits. Or even better: he creates them. He goes far afield. He doesn't settle on the first or second impression, or on those that follow: he observes and makes notes. He notes movements unworthy of discussion, turns and halfturns, forty reductions and eighty profiles. He surprises the model in his habits and mishaps, in forming expressions, in exhaustion and strain. He gets to know all the transitions in his features, where smiles come from and where they go. He observes the man's face like a scene he takes part in himself; he is in the middle of the action, indifferent to none of it, and nothing that happens escapes him. He doesn't want to hear anything about the man, and he doesn't want to know anything other than what he sees. But he sees everything.

He spends a good deal of time with each bust. The material grows to a certain point in drawings, in a few strokes of the pen or brushes of color, and also in his memory, for Rodin developed his memory into a resource that is at once reliable and always ready. During the sittings his eye sees far more than he can record at the time. He forgets none

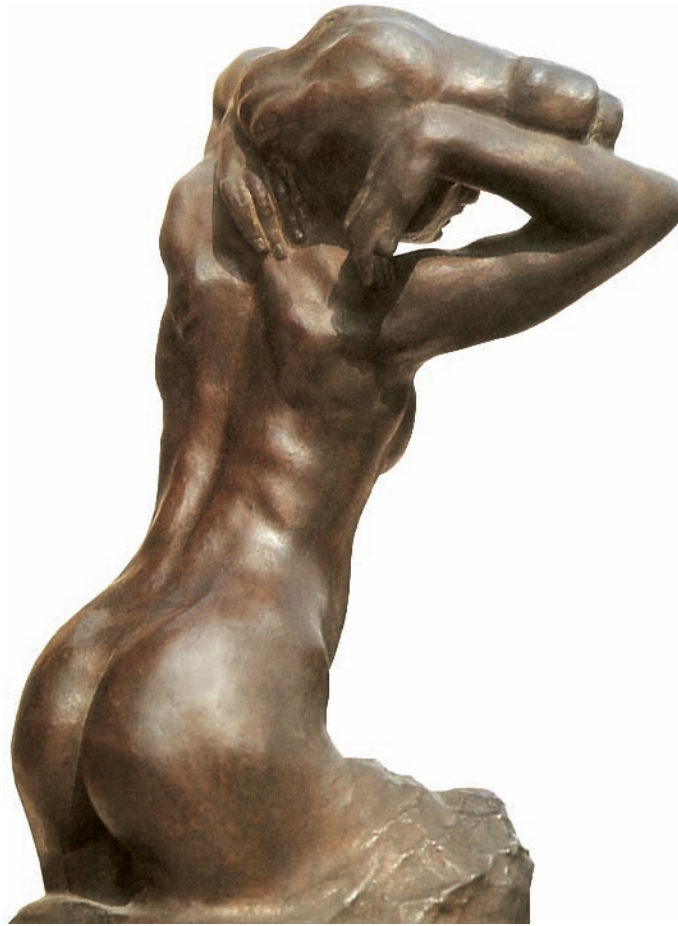
Torso of Adèle, 1882.
Plaster, 16.8 x 47.5 x 19.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Eternal Spring, 1884.
Bronze, 64.5 x 58 x 44.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Young Mother, 1885.
Bronze, 39 x 36.9 x 25.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



of it, and often the real work begins, drawn from the rich store of his memory, only after the model has left. His memory is wide and spacious; impressions are not changed within it, but they adjust to their surroundings, and when they pass into his hands it is as if they were the entirely natural gestures of these hands.

This method leads to massive combinations of hundreds of life's moments: and this too is the impression we receive from these busts. The many distant contrasts and unexpected transitions that make up a person and their constant development join together here in auspicious union, holding one another fast by an inner force of adhesion. These people are assembled from the full breadth of their beings, and all the climates of their temperament are revealed in the hemispheres of their heads. There is the sculptor Jules Dalou (p. 48), in whom a nervous exhaustion vibrates beside a tenacious, almost petty energy; there is Henri Rochefort's adventurous mask; there is Octave Mirabeau, with the dreams and longings of a poet dawning behind the façade of the man of action; and Puvis de Chevannes and Victor Hugo, whom Rodin knew so well; and perhaps above all, the indescribably beautiful bronze portrait of the poet Jean-Paul Laurens. The surface of this bust is so profound and at the same time so great in its conception, so restrained in its bearing and strong in its expression, so alert and full of movement, that we wonder whether nature itself took

Toilet of Venus, 1885.
Bronze, 46.5 x 21 x 20 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Venus Awakening, c. 1887.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





this work from the hands of the sculptor, to hold and preserve it as one of her most precious possessions. The magnificent patina, its smoky black surface pierced by metal shining like shooting flames of fire, contributes enormously to the perfection and uncanny beauty of this sculpture.

There is also a bust of Bastien-Lepage, beautiful and melancholy, bearing an expression of the suffering artist whose every effort represents one long parting from his work. It was made for Damvillers, the painter's hometown, where it stands in the churchyard cemetery. So this piece is in fact a monument. But in their completeness and breadth of conception, all Rodin's busts have something monumental about them. With this one, however, there is a greater simplification of the planes, an even more rigorous selection of that which is essential, and all with an eye toward being viewed from a distance. The monuments created by Rodin tended increasingly to fulfill these conditions. He began with the memorial of Claude Gelée for Nancy, and it is a steep ascent from this first, rather interesting attempt to the grandiose achievement of *Balzac*.

Many of Rodin's monuments were taken to the Americas, and the oldest of them was destroyed in Chile before it was even placed in position. This was the equestrian statue of General Lynch (pp. 56, 57). Like Leonardo's lost masterpiece, which it may very well have approached in its force of expression and in the wonderfully animated oneness of horse and rider, this statue was not meant to survive. Based on a small plaster model in the Rodin Museum at Meudon, we can only conclude that the image was that of a thin man sitting erect in the saddle, not with the brutal arrogance of a mercenary but rather with a kind of nervous tension; more like a man who dutifully exercises his authority than one who has made it his life. Even in this cast, we can see the general's hand pointing forward, emerging from the massive foundation of man and beast. It is this same feature that lends an unforgettable majesty to the gesture of Victor Hugo, that sense of having come from afar, that force compelling us to believe at first sight. The great living hand of an old man who converses with the sea doesn't come from the poet alone; it descends from the summit of the whole group as if from a mountain on which it had been praying before it began to speak. Victor Hugo is the exile here, the solitary man from Guernsey, and it is one of the wonders of this monument that the muses surrounding him do not give the impression of figures come to visit the forsaken old man: on the contrary, they are shades of his solitude become visible. Rodin achieves this impression by internalizing each of the figures, and by concentrating them all around the poet's inner self; here again, by giving individual life to the points of contact, he succeeds in making these wonderfully vital figures seem to be expressions of the man who is seated. They surround him like great gestures performed once before, gestures so young and beautiful that a goddess granted them the favor of immortality, to endure forever in the form of beautiful women.

Rodin made many studies for the figure of the poet himself. During Hugo's receptions in the Hôtel Lusignan, he withdrew to a window niche, where he observed and noted all the old man's movements, and every expression on his animated face. Rodin's

Iris, Messenger of the Gods,
1890-1891.
Bronze, 82.1 x 86.3 x 52 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Perseus and Medusa, 1887.
Bronze, 49.5 x 26.4 x 49.1 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

various portraits of Hugo were derived from these preparations. But he had to delve even deeper for the monument. He removed himself from all the individual impressions and ordered them from a distance. Then, just as the single figure of Homer was likely created from a series of rhapsodies, Rodin created this single image from all that was in his memory. And he provided this final image with the greatness of the legendary; as if in the end it might all have been a myth that could be traced back to massive rocks looming up from the sea, in whose strange outlines distant peoples had seen a sleeping gesture.

Where historical characters or material seek to live again in his art, Rodin has always had the power to reveal that which is timeless in the past. The best example of this may well be *The Burghers of Calais* (pp. 16, 17). The historical material for this work consisted of just a few columns in the Chronicle of Froissart. It was the story of



Meditation, 1885.
Bronze, 146 x 69 x 54 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Crouching Woman, 1882.
Plaster, 32.9 x 27.5 x 22.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Crouching Woman, 1882.
Bronze, 32.9 x 27.5 x 22.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.







how the town of Calais was besieged by Edward III, how the English king refused to show mercy toward this town gripped by hunger, and how in the end he agreed to lift the siege only if six of its most distinguished citizens would deliver themselves to his hands, "for him to do with them as he pleases." He demands that they leave the city wearing nothing on their heads, clad only in shirts, each with a rope around his neck and the keys to the fortified city in hand. The chronicler describes the scene in the town; he reports how the mayor, Jean de Vienne, orders that the bells be rung, and how the burghers assemble in the town square. They wait in silence, having heard the terrible news. But then the heroes among them begin to stand up, those chosen ones who feel called to die. At this point the wailing and weeping of the crowd can almost be heard in the historian's words.

He himself seems moved for a moment, as if his hand were trembling as he wrote. Then he collects himself. He names four of the heroes, but appears to forget the other two. He says of the first that he was the richest man in town. Of the second he tells us that he had power and prestige, and "two beautiful young ladies for daughters." Of the third man he knows that he was rich in possessions and inheritance, and of the fourth only that he was the brother of the third. He reports how they removed all but their shirts, tied ropes around their necks, and set out with keys to the fortified city. He tells how they arrived in the king's camp and describes how harshly they were received, and how the executioner had already come up behind them when his lord, upon the request of his queen, decided to spare them. "He heeded the words of his wife," Froissart writes, "because she was with child." That is all there is in the chronicle.

But this little material was enough for Rodin. He felt immediately that there was a moment in this story when something great happened, something that knew no dates or names, something entirely independent and simple. He turned his complete attention to the moment of their departure. He saw how these men began to walk. He felt how each of them was filled with the whole life they had lived, how each one stood there, weighted with his past and ready to carry it out of the city. Six men appeared before him, of whom no two were alike. There were only two brothers among them, and the resemblance, if any, was vague. But each one of these men had come to a decision and lived through this last hour in his own way, rejoicing in spirit and suffering in body, which still clung to life. And then he no longer saw these figures. Gestures arose in his memory, gestures of rejection, renunciation, and farewell. He collected them. He formed them all. They flowed to him from the fullness of his knowledge. It was as if hundreds of heroes rose up in his memory, willing to be sacrificed. And he took these hundreds and made of them six. He formed them nude, each of them alone in the expressiveness of their shivering bodies. They were more than life-size, as befitted the natural proportion of their resolve. He created the old man with arms hanging down as if his joints were loose, and he gave him a heavy, dragging stride, the worn-out gait of an ancestor, and a tired expression, which flows over his face and into his beard. He created the man who carries the keys. There is life in him for many years to come, and it is all concentrated in this last

The Thought,
between 1893 and 1895.
Marble, 74.2 x 43.5 x 46.1 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



sudden hour. He can hardly stand it. His lips are pressed together, and the key cuts into his hands. He has set his strength on fire, and it is burning within him, in his brave defiance. He created the man who bows his head and holds it in his hands, as if to collect himself, to be alone for one more moment.

He created the two brothers, one of whom looks back, while the other lowers his head in a motion of decisive submission, as if he were already offering it to the executioner. And he created the vague gesture of that man who "passes through life," whom Gustave Geffroy has referred to as *le passant*. He walks along, but then turns back one last time, not to see the town, nor those who are weeping or those walking with him. He turns around, back to himself, his right arm is raised, bent ambivalently at the elbow; his hand opens in the air and releases something, as if he were setting a bird free. It is a parting from all uncertainty, from a happiness not yet realized, from a sorrow that now will wait in vain, from people who live somewhere, and whom he might have met at some point, from all the possibilities of tomorrow and the days to come, and also from a notion of death as something distant, gentle and silent, something that would come only after a very long time. This figure, placed by itself in a dark, forgotten garden, would make a



fitting monument for all who have died young. In creating these last of life's gestures, Rodin gave life to each of these men. The single figures are sublime in their simplicity. One might think of Donatello, and perhaps even more of Claus Sluter and his prophets in the Chartreuse of Dijon.

It appears initially as if Rodin had done nothing more to unite them. He has provided them all with the same shirt and rope, and placed them beside one another in two rows; the three who are already walking are in front, while the others behind them turn to the right, as if in the act of joining them. The piece was originally designed for the town square in Calais, to be placed on the very spot where the arduous journey once began. These silent images were meant to stand there on a low platform, raised only slightly from the daily life of the town, as if the ghastly procession might commence anew at any given moment. Because it was contrary to custom, however, the people of Calais rejected the prospect of such a low pedestal. And so Rodin proposed a different setting. He asked them to build a square tower with plain hewn walls, with roughly the same dimensions as the base of the sculpture and a height of nearly two stories. It would rise at the seashore, and provide a place for the six figures to stand in the solitude of the

Torso of Adèle, 1882.
Plaster, 16.8 x 47.5 x 19.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

wind and sky. Not surprisingly, this suggestion was rejected as well, in spite of the fact that it was clearly in keeping with the essence of the work. Had they tried it, we would have had an incomparable opportunity to admire the unity of the group, which consists of six separate figures fused together as if they were a single thing. And yet the individual figures did not touch one another; they stood side by side, like the last trees of a felled forest, united only by the air, which seemed to be part of them in an extraordinary way.

Walking around this group, it was astonishing to see how the gestures rose pure and great from the rhythm of the contours, how they surged, paused for a moment, and then fell back into the mass, like flags being furled. Everything there was clear and distinct. There was no room for chance. As with all Rodin's groups, this one was self-contained, a whole world in itself, filled with a life that circulated without escaping at any point. Overlapping contours replaced the contact of planes here, although these contours too were a form of contact, reduced infinitely by the intervening medium of the air, which influences and changes them. Contacts from a distance came about, forms encountered one another and overlapped, like layers of clouds or mountains, where the air separating them is not an abyss but a gradual transition, an indication of direction. The interaction of the air with the work it surrounds was always enormously important for Rodin. He designed his Things and their planes in relation to space, and it is this that gives them that greatness and independence, that indescribable maturity, which distinguishes them from all other things. But now that his interpretation of nature had gradually led to an emphasis on expression, it became apparent that the relation of the atmosphere to his works had intensified as well, so that it surrounded the intersecting planes in a more compelling, passionate way. If his Things had simply stood in space before, now space drew the Things into itself. One rarely sees anything comparable to this effect, but some of the animals on cathedrals have it. There, too, the air seems to commune with the figures: it seems to become calm or windy as it passes alternately over places of emphasis and relief. In fact, when Rodin elevates the surfaces of his works, when he creates the highest points and gives greater depth to the cavities, the result closely resembles the way the atmosphere interacts with things that have been exposed to it for centuries.

For the air too has elevated, deepened, and covered with dust, conditioning things with rain and frost, with sun and storms, for a life that passes more slowly, if also more prominently, in dark perpetuity. Rodin was on his own way to this effect with *The Burghers of Calais*. The monumental principle of his art was already realized in this work. With these means he was able to create things that were visible from a great distance, things that were surrounded not just by the air around them, but by the whole sky. He could catch and reflect the distances as if with a mirror, and he could form a gesture that seemed immense, forcing space to commune with it. A good example is the slim young man who kneels and extends his arms upward and backward in a gesture of boundless appeal. Rodin called this figure *The Prodigal Son* (p. 161), but somehow it took on the title *Prayer*, which it quickly outgrew as well. For it is not simply a son kneeling before his

Danaïd, c. 1889.
Marble, 36 x 71 x 53 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Ugolino and his children, c. 1881.
Plaster, 41.5 x 40.3 x 58.7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



father. This gesture makes God necessary, and in he who performs it are all who need him. All expanses belong to this stone; it is alone in the world.

The same is true of *Balzac* (p. 30, 31). Rodin gave him proportions that may actually exceed those of the writer. He captured the essence of his being, but he did not stop with the boundaries of this essence; he sketched mighty contours that extend beyond the man's achievements to encompass his ultimate, most distant possibilities, contours prefigured in the gravestones of distant ancestors. He was completely absorbed by this figure for years. He visited the countryside of Touraine, where Balzac grew up and to which he returns repeatedly in his books, he went through his correspondence, he studied the existing portraits, and he read his works again and again. He encountered Balzac's characters on all the winding paths of this work, whole families and generations, a world that seemed to have an undying faith in the existence of its creator, to live through his life and to gaze fondly on him. He saw that these hundreds of characters, whatever their various functions might be, could all be traced back to the man who had created them. And just as one can guess which play is being performed from the expressions of the audience, he searched all these characters' faces for the man who had given them eternal life. Like Balzac, he believed in the reality of this world, and he succeeded for a while in inserting himself into it. He lived as if Balzac had conceived him as well, unnoticed among the multitude of his creations. He learned a great deal in this way. Everything else appeared much less eloquent. The daguerreotypes offered general points of reference, but certainly nothing new. The face they showed was familiar from portraits he had seen in school. Only one of them, which belonged to Stéphane Mallarmé and which showed Balzac in suspenders and without a coat, was more characteristic. Then he enlisted the accounts of his contemporaries, from the words of Théophile Gautier to the notes of the Goncourts, and the extraordinary sketch of Balzac by Lamartine. Aside from that there were only the bust by David in the Comédie-Française and the small portrait by Louis Boulanger.

The Temptation of Saint Anthony,
c. 1900.
Marble, 61 x 107 x 70 cm.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.



Torso of Ugolino, 1882.
Plaster, 18.6 x 39.3 x 19.8 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Psyche, 1899.
Marble, 73.7 x 68.6 x 38.1 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Study for Fugit Amor.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Filled wholly with the spirit of Balzac, Rodin now proceeded to construct his outer appearance with the assistance of these aids. He used live models of similar physical proportions to make seven figures in various positions, all of them brilliantly accomplished. The men he employed for this task were heavy, sturdy types, with thick legs and short arms, and the result of the preliminary studies was a Balzac very much like the man depicted in the daguerreotypes of Nadar's age². But he felt sure nothing final had yet been given. He returned to Lamartine's description. There was written: "His face was elemental," and: "He was so filled with soul that it carried his heavy body as if it were nothing." Rodin felt instinctively that a large part of his task lay in these sentences. He came closer to a solution when he tried to put all seven figures in the hoods of monks, imitating Balzac's favored attire for working. The result was Balzac in a cowl, far too intimate, too withdrawn in the silence of his clothing. But Rodin's vision grew, moving slowly from form to form. And at last he saw him. He saw a broad,



striding figure, shedding all his weight in the fall of the cloak. A powerful neck met the hair, and drawn back into this hair was a face, watching, in a rush of watching, seething with Creation: an elemental face. This was Balzac in all his prolific abundance, founder of generations and squanderer of fates. This was a man whose eyes needed nothing; had the world been empty, he would have filled it with his gaze. This was the man who sought his fortune in fabled silver mines, and happiness in foreign love. This was Creation itself, in all its presumption, arrogance, frenzy, and ecstasy, making use of Balzac to appear in this form. The head, thrown back, perched on the peak of this figure like balls dancing on the spray of fountains. All heaviness had become light, and it rose and fell.

In a single moment of tremendous concentration and tragic exaggeration, Rodin had seen his Balzac, and this is the way he made him. The vision did not pass; it was transformed. This development in Rodin's work, which surrounded the great and monumental

Fallen Angel, 1895.
Bronze, 38 x 69.8 x 40.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



things in his work with breadth, also endowed the others with a new beauty. It provided them with a distinct nearness. Among the more recent works there are small groups marked by an extraordinary unity of composition and a wonderfully tender treatment of the marble. These pieces retain at midday the mysterious shimmer emanated by white objects at twilight. This is not due solely to the vitality of the points of contact; a close look reveals that flat marble bands have been left between some of the figures, and these crosspieces connect the individual parts of one form with another in the background.

This is no accident. These bands of stone prevent the observer from pointlessly looking through and beyond the thing, and into empty space. They preserve the rounded contours of the forms, which tend to appear sharp and worn down in the gaps, and they gather the light like bowls with a constant, gentle overflow. While Rodin seems to have intended to draw the air as close as possible to the surface of his things, here it is almost as if he had dissolved the stone in it: here the marble appears to be a firm, fecund core, and the pulsating air its last, most delicate contour. The air that comes to this stone abandons its will; it doesn't pass beyond this piece to other things; it embraces the stone, hesitates, lingers, and lives in it.

This obstruction of all unessential vision represented a kind of approach to the relief. In fact, Rodin planned to make an immense relief in which all the light effects he achieved in the smaller groups are to be brought together. For this work he imagined a broad band of relief winding its way upward with an interior staircase rising alongside these spirals, closed off to the outside by vaulted arcades. The figures live in their own

Rose Beuret, c. 1890.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Scream, c. 1886.
Bronze, 25.2 x 28.7 x 18.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Large Clenched Left Hand, c. 1885.
Bronze, 46.4 x 26.4 x 19.3 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.

Clenched Left Hand with Figure,
1906 or 1907.
Bronze, 44.5 x 29.2 x 26.4 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collection,
Musée Rodin, Paris.





atmosphere on the walls of this passageway, and the result will be an art that knows the mysteries of *clair-obscur*, a sculpture of twilight, akin to the figures that stand in the vestibules of ancient cathedrals.

This was the *Tower of Labour* (p. 54). On it, a history of work develops on the slowly rising relief. The long scroll begins in a crypt, with images of men growing old in the mines, and its broad path that passes through all the forms of human occupation, from the loud and vigorous to the increasingly taciturn, from blast furnaces to the work of the heart, and from the work of hammers to that of the brain. Two figures loom at the entrance, Day and Night, and two winged deities crown the summit of the tower, blessings descended from illustrious spheres. Rodin didn't think of representing work with a single great figure or gesture, for it is not something to be viewed from a distance. It belongs in the workplace, in the small rooms of craftsmen; in heads and in darkness.

This he knew well, for he himself was constantly working. His life would pass like a single workday. He had a number of ateliers. Some well known to visitors and correspondents, others were secluded and known to no one. These are bare cells, sparsely filled with gray and dust. But their poverty was like the great grey poverty of God, in which the trees awaken in March. There was something of early spring in these spaces: a quiet promise and deep solemnity. When the monument was finally in place, it was obvious that with this work, too, Rodin wanted nothing beyond his art. The working body had revealed itself to him just as the loving body had before. It was a new revelation of Life. But this creator lived so completely in his things, absorbed entirely in the depths of his work, that he could only respond to these revelations with the simple means of his art. To him, new life essentially meant new surfaces and new gestures. In this sense Life has been simplified for him. He could no longer go wrong.

Rodin's development provided a sign for all the arts in this confused age. He was a worker who desired nothing more than to give himself completely, with all his strength, to the humble and difficult world of his craft. There was a kind of renunciation of life in this, but with patience he gained it back: for the world came to his work.

1. The Musée des Artistes Vivants, established in the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris exhibited the French state's collection of contemporary art from 1818 to 1937.

2. Félix Nadar was a pseudonym for Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820-1910), a renowned photographer, caricaturist, novelist and balloonist.

Large Left Hand of a Pianist, 1885.
Bronze, 18.4 x 25.4 x 12.4 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.



The Walking Man (Conference of 1907)³

There are a few names that would establish a sense of solidarity between us if I were to pronounce them here and now, a warmth and unanimity that would make it appear as if I – only apparently isolated – were speaking from among you, as if I were one of your voices. But the name that presides over this evening like a constellation of five brilliant stars cannot be spoken. Not now. It would only disturb you, setting in motion currents of sympathy and hostility, while I need your silence and the unclouded surface of your obliging anticipation.

I beg those of you who still can to forget the name in question, and I request of all an even wider forgetting. You are accustomed to hearing people speak about art, and who would deny that you are particularly well inclined to words addressed to you in this sense? A certain strong and beautiful movement has fixed your gaze like the flight of a great bird, a movement that could no longer be concealed: and now you are asked to lower your eyes for part of an evening. For I have no desire to draw your attention to the firmament of uncertain developments. Nor do I wish to predict the future based on the bird flight of modern art.

I come before you to remind you of your childhood. No, not of yours, but rather of all that ever was childhood. For it should be possible to awaken memories that are not yours, memories that are older than you. I shall seek to restore connections and renew relationships that came about long before you.

If I intended to speak of people, I could begin right where you left off when you came into this room. Picking up on your conversations, I would naturally come to everything – lifted and swept along by this exhilarating age, on the shores of which everything human seems to lie, inundated by it and mirrored in unexpected ways. Reflecting on my task, however, it has become clear to me that I have not come before you to speak of people, but rather of things.

Things. When I say the word (are you listening?), it grows silent; the silence that surrounds things. All motion subsides and becomes contour, and something permanent is formed from the past and the future: space, the great calm of things, liberated from desire.

No, you do not feel it growing silent. The word “things” means nothing to you – too much and thus too ordinary – and passes right by. And in this sense it is good that I have

Pierre de Wissant,
detail of the left hand, 1886.
Bronze.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Edward Steichen, *Portrait of Rodin with The Thinker and the Monument to Victor Hugo*, 1902.
Silver print, 33.4 x 42 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.





evoked childhood; perhaps this sense of something precious, something associated with many memories, can help me bring this word home to you.

If possible, I ask you to return with your mature, refined sensibility to one of the things that was most familiar to you as a child. Try to remember if there was anything in the world that was closer, more familiar, and more necessary than this thing. Was it not the case that everything else in the world could cause you pain or treat you badly, frightening you with pain and confusing you with uncertainty? If kindness, trust, and the sense of not being alone could be counted among your earliest experiences, do you not owe it to that thing? Was it not with a thing the first time you shared your little heart like a piece of bread that would have to suffice for two?

Later you would find a holy joy in the legends of the saints, a blessed humility and a readiness to be all things, and you would recognize it because some small piece of wood had once taken on the same qualities for you. This small, forgotten object, which was willing to mean almost anything, made you familiar with thousands of things by playing thousands of roles; it was animal and tree, king and child, and when it receded, all these things were there.

This something, worthless as it was, prepared the way for your first relationships with the world; it introduced you to life and to people. And what's more: in its being and its outward appearance, in its final destruction or its mysterious slipping away, you experienced everything human, deep into death itself.

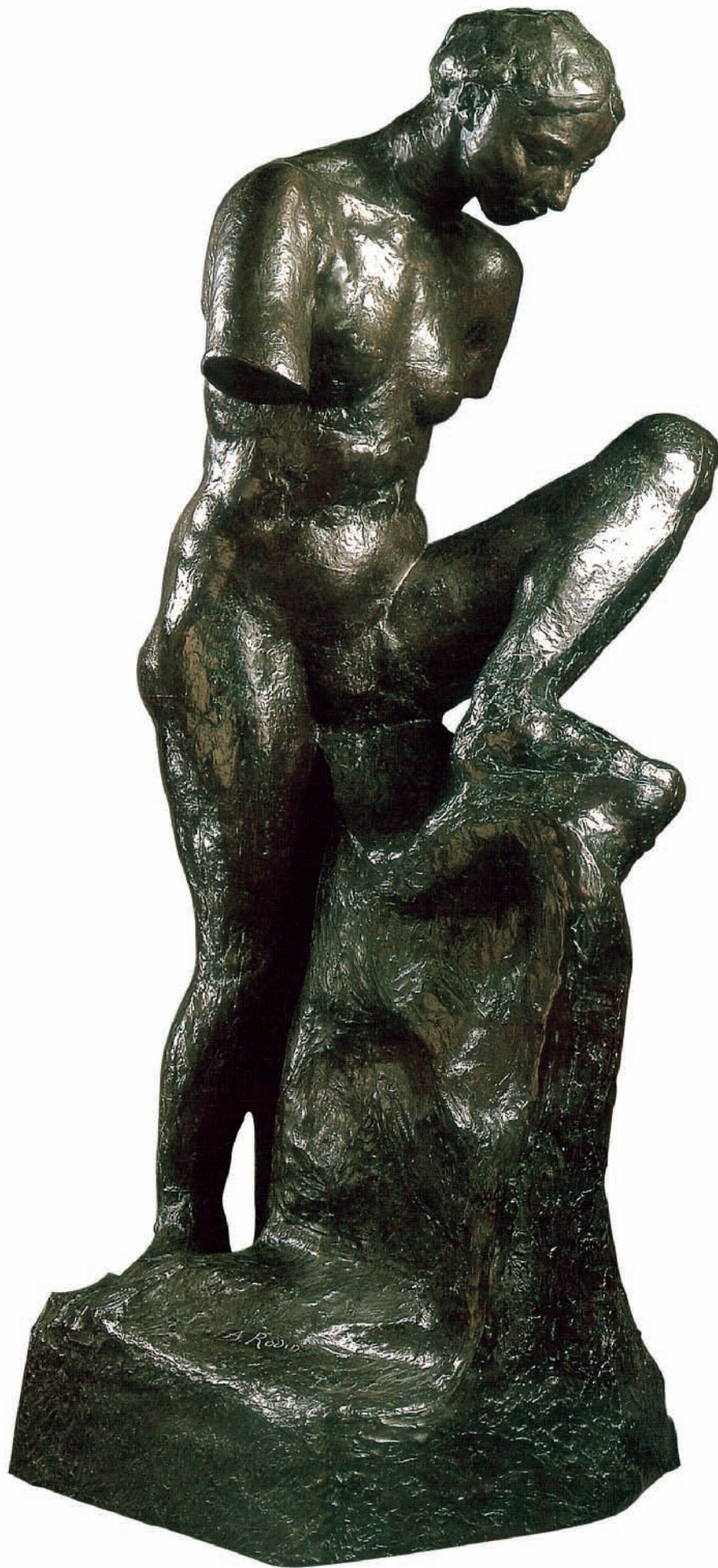
You will hardly remember these things, and you are rarely conscious of the fact that even today you still need things, which, like the things of your childhood, require your trust, love, and devotion. How can things become so important? How are things related to us at all? What is their story?

Human beings began forming things very early. With great difficulty, and following models provided by the things they found in nature, people made tools and vessels, and it must have been a strange experience initially to view what they had made with their own hands as just as right and authentic as what really existed. Things came into being blindly, in the fierce throes of work, still warm with the traces of an open, dangerous life – but no sooner were they finished and set aside than they took their place among other things, assumed their composure and quiet dignity, and looked out from their own permanence with a distant, melancholy consent.

This experience was so remarkable and so great that it is not difficult to imagine how things soon came to be made for their own sake. The earliest images of gods may well have been manifestations of this experience, attempts to form something immortal and permanent from the human and animal world, something belonging to a higher order: a thing.

What kind of thing? A beautiful one? No. Who would have known what beauty is? A thing bearing some resemblance. A thing in which one recognized what was loved and feared, and the incomprehensible in all of it. Do you remember such things? Perhaps there is one that has long seemed simply ridiculous. But one day you were struck by its urgency, the particular, almost desperate earnestness all things have; and

Whistler's Muse, 1907.
Bronze, 223.5 x 90.2 x 108.9 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.





did you not notice how a beauty came over this image as if against its will, a beauty you would not have thought possible?

If you have experienced moments like this, I wish to invoke them now. For in these moments things are brought back to life. Nothing can move you if you do not allow for it to surprise you with an unimaginable beauty. Beauty is always something we come to, but we don't know what this something is.

The notion of an aesthetic sensibility that is capable of grasping beauty has led you astray, and produced artists who understand their task to be the creation of beauty. It bears repeating in this context that beauty is not "made" at all. No one has ever made beauty. We can only create variously agreeable or sublime conditions for that which sometimes dwells among us: an altar and fruit and a flame. Nothing beyond that is in our power. And the thing itself, which evolves irrepressibly in human hands, is like the Eros of Socrates, it is the *daimones*, between god and man, not necessarily beautiful itself, but pure love and longing for beauty.

Imagine how completely this insight changes everything when it dawns on an artist. The artist who is guided by this knowledge does not need to think of beauty; in fact, he knows no better than anyone else what it consists of. Directed by an urge to fulfill a purpose far beyond himself, he knows only that there are certain conditions under which beauty may come to the things he makes. And his calling consists of getting to know these conditions, and gaining the ability to produce them.

But those who study these conditions thoroughly soon learn that they do not pass beyond the surface and nowhere penetrate the core of the thing; and that the most one can do is to produce a surface that is self-contained and in no sense fortuitous, a surface which, surrounded, shadowed, and illuminated like natural things by the atmosphere, is absolutely nothing but surface. Removed from the pretentious and capricious rhetoric, art returns to its humble, dignified place in everyday life, to craft. For what does it mean to produce a surface?

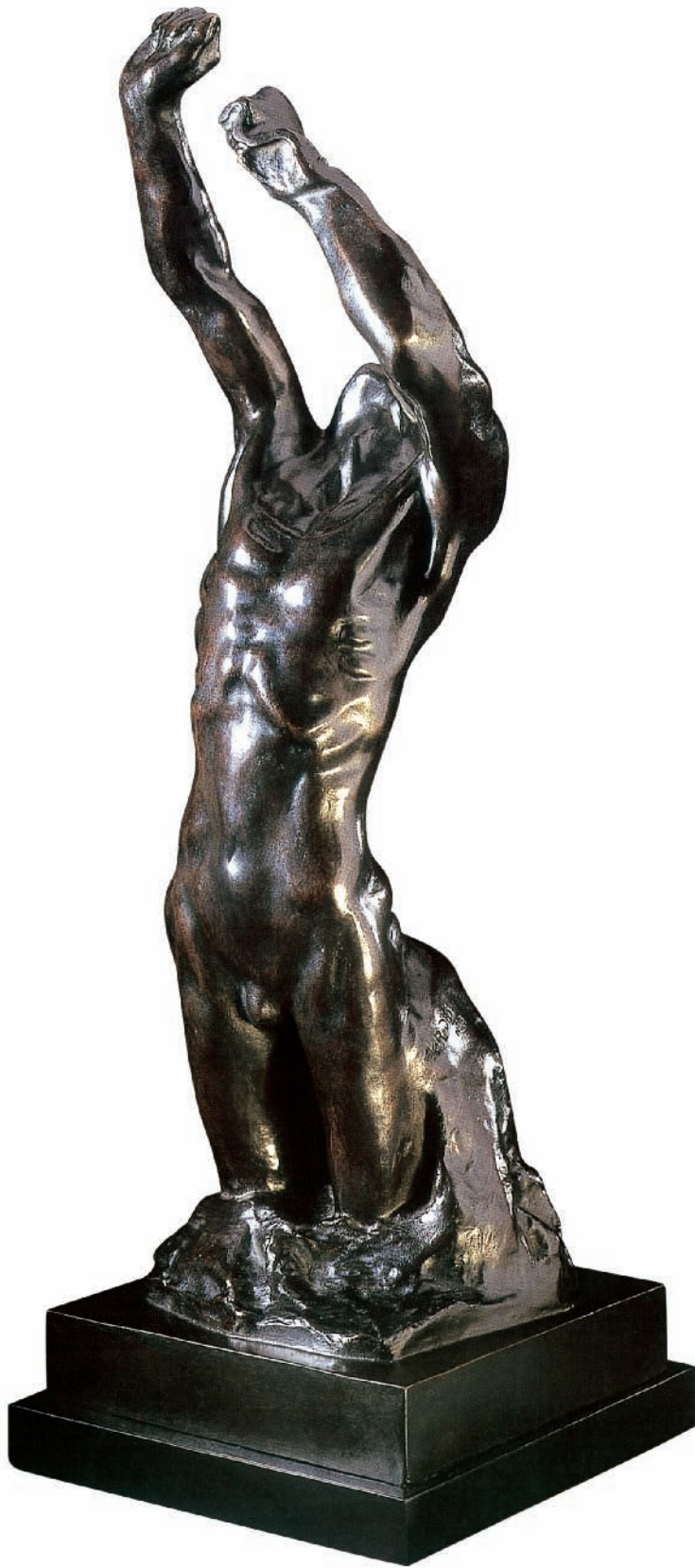
Let us consider for a moment whether everything before us, everything we perceive and explain and interpret, does not consist simply of surfaces. And as for what we call mind and soul and love: are they not all just a subtle change on the small surface of a nearby face? And doesn't the artist who has formed this surface have to keep to the tangible element that corresponds to his medium, to the form he can lay hold of and imitate? And wouldn't the artist who is capable of seeing and recreating all forms provide us (almost without knowing it) with all the life of the spirit? With everything that has ever been called longing or pain or bliss, and with everything that cannot be named in its indescribable spiritual vitality?

For all happiness that has ever thrilled the heart; all greatness that has nearly destroyed us with its force; every broad, transforming thought – was once nothing but the pursing of lips, the raising of eyebrows, the shadows on a face: and this expression on the mouth, this line above the eyebrows, this darkness on a face – perhaps they were always there in exactly the same form: like a marking on an animal, a crack in a rock, a bruise on a piece of fruit...

I Am Beautiful, 1882.
Bronze, 69 x 36 x 33.7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Spirit of War, 1883.
Bronze, 113 x 57.2 x 38 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.



Despairing Adolescent, 1882.
Bronze, 41.3 x 14 x 14.6 cm.
Fondation Iris et B. Gerald Cantor.

There is really just one single surface, which undergoes thousands of shifts and transformations. We could think the whole world in this thought, if only for a moment, and it would become a simple task in our hands. For the question as to whether something can come to life does not depend on great ideas, but rather on whether he makes of them a craft, an ongoing project that remains with him to the end.

At this point I dare to mention the name that cannot be withheld any longer:

Rodin. As you know, this is the name of countless things. You ask to see them, and I am confused because I cannot show you a single one.

But I almost feel as if I could see some of them in your memory, as if I could lift them out and place them before us: that man with the broken nose, unforgettable as a suddenly raised fist; that young man who stretches up in a motion as familiar as your own awakening; that walker, upright like a new word for walking in the vocabulary of your feeling; and the one who sits, thinking with his whole body, withdrawing into himself; and the burgher with the key, like a great repository of pure pain.

And *Eve* (p 67), bent into her own embrace as if from a great distance, her hands turning outward to reject everything, including her own changing body.

And the sweet, soft, inner voice, armless like life within and separated from the rhythm of the group.

And some small thing whose name you have forgotten, made from a shimmering white embrace that holds together like a knot; and the other that may be called *Paolo and Francesca* (pp. 84-85), and still smaller ones you find within yourself, like fruits with very thin skin. And then your eyes, like the lenses of a magic projector, cast a gigantic Balzac on the wall behind me. The image of a creator in all his hubris, erect in his own motion as in a vortex that inhales the whole world into his seething head.

And now that these have been called from your memory, shall I draw on others from these hundreds of things? On Orpheus, Ugolino, or Saint Theresa receiving her wound? On *Victor Hugo* (p. 36) with his commanding gesture, oblique and massive, and the other figure, oblivious to all but the whispering voices, and then still a third, serenaded from below by three maidens' voices, like a spring bursting from the earth to meet him?

And I can already feel how the name falls apart in my mouth, how it all is simply the poet, the same poet who is called Orpheus when his arm extends beyond all things to the strings, the same one who clings in pain and anguish to the feet of the Muse as she escapes, and who dies in the end, his face upright in the shadow of the voices that fill the world with song. A death so impressive that this small group is often called *Resurrection*.

But who can stop the surge of lovers rising up on the sea of this work? Fates draw near in the relentless connectedness of these figures, with sweet names of little comfort, but suddenly they vanish like a passing radiance – and we understand why. We see men and women, men and women, again and again, men and women. And the longer one looks, the simpler the content becomes, until one sees simply: things.

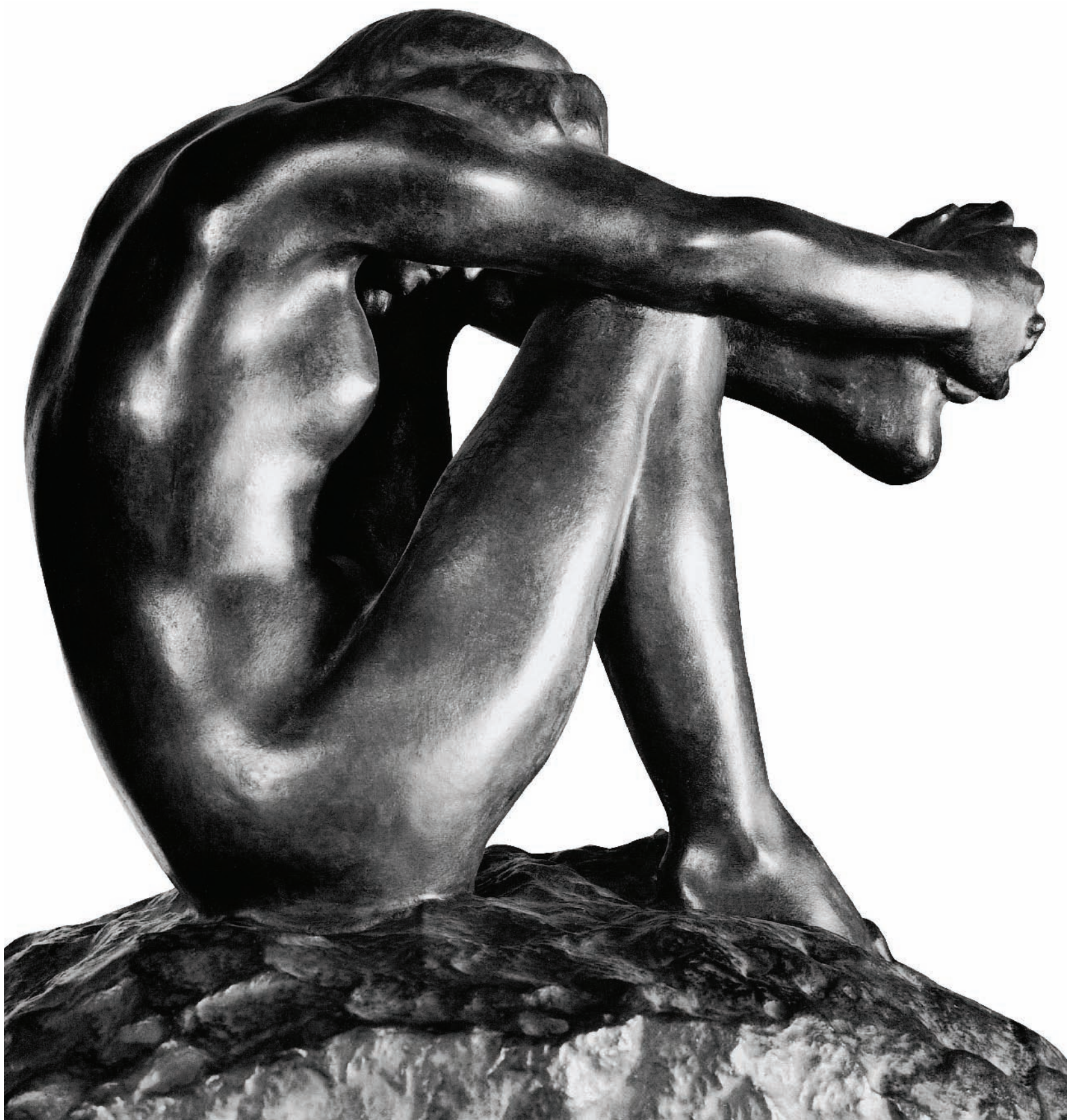
Female Torso, 1910.
Bronze, 74 x 35 x 60 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Fugit Amor, c. 1884.
Bronze, 30 x 51 x 19 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.









At this point words become inadequate and I return to the great discovery I began preparing you for, the knowledge of the one surface with which the world offered itself to this art. Offered, but not yet gave. Accepting it would (and still does) require endless work.

Consider for a moment how much work would be required for an artist who wished to master all surfaces; after all, no one thing is just like another. He wasn't concerned with knowing the body in general, nor the face or the hand (none of which exists anyhow); but rather all bodies, all faces, all hands. This is a task! And how simple and serious it is, how completely devoid of temptation and promise; how completely unpretentious.

A craft develops that appears to be that of an immortal; it is so broad, so infinite and beyond boundaries, and so dedicated to a process of constant learning. Where to find a patience adequate to this craft? This worker renewed it endlessly with love.

And that is perhaps the secret of Rodin, that he was a lover who could not be resisted. His desire was so lasting and passionate and uninterrupted that all things yielded: the things of nature and the mysterious creations of all those ages in which human beings had longed to be nature. He didn't dwell on those who are easily admired.

He sought to learn every element of admiration. He took on the difficult, reticent things, carrying them like a burden, and their weight pressed him further into his craft. It must have become clear to him under this pressure that what matters with art objects, just as with a weapon or a scale, is not how they look or the "effect" they create; rather, the most important thing is that they be well-made.

This workmanship, this working with the purest conscience, was everything. Recreating a thing meant going over every part, concealing nothing, betraying nothing; knowing hundreds of profiles, every angle and overlap. Only then was a thing there, only then was it an island, separated completely from the continent of uncertainty. This work (the work on the *modèle*) was the same in everything one made, and it had to be done so humbly, so obediently, so devotedly, so impartially on the face and the hand and the body, that names no longer mattered; one simply gave to matter without knowing what would result, like a worm making its way from place to place in the dark.

For who can be uninhibited when confronted by forms with names? Isn't there inevitably some selection involved in calling something a face? But the creative artist has no right to select. The artist's work must be imbued with a spirit of unyielding dutifulness. Forms must pass unembellished through his fingers, like something entrusted to him, in order to be pure and intact in his work.

And the forms in Rodin's work are pure and intact; without questioning, he transferred them to his things, which look as if they have never been touched when he finishes with them. Light and shadow grow soft around them as they do around very fresh fruit, and more alive with movement, as if the morning wind had brought them.

Desperation, 1890.
Bronze, 17.5 x 9.1 x 8.4 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Bust of Jean-Baptiste Rodin, 1860.
Bronze, 41 x 28.6 x 24.1 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation.

Young Girl with Snake,
between 1880 and 1899.
Bronze, 34 x 12.1 x 14.3 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Here we must speak of this movement, although certainly not in the common reproachful sense; for the motion in the gestures of this sculpture, which has been widely remarked, takes place within the things, like the circulation of an inner current, never disturbing the calm and stability of their architecture. But the introduction of movement into sculpture does not in itself represent a significant innovation.

This kind of motion is new; however, where the light interacts in extraordinary ways with the singular composition of these surfaces, the inclines of which are so multifarious that the light flows slowly in places, then falls precipitously in others, appearing shallow and then deep, glossy then flat. The light that makes contact with one of these things is no longer just any light, it no longer undergoes incidental changes; the thing takes possession of this light and uses it for its own purposes.

Rodin reestablished this acquisition and appropriation of light by way of clearly defined surfaces as an essential quality of sculpture. Various solutions to this problem had been attempted in classical and Gothic sculpture, and he placed himself in the most venerable traditions when his development finally led to the mastery of light.

Some stone really does have its own light, such as the lowered face on the block in the Luxembourg Museum. This figure called *La Pensée* (*The Thought*; p. 98) leans forward into shadow, coming to rest above the white shimmer of the marble, under whose influence the shadows dissipate and pass into a vaguely luminous transparency. And who could forget one of the smaller groups, where two bodies create twilight and encounter one another in its veiled softness?

And it is truly extraordinary to see the light pass slowly over the prone back of *Danaïd* (p. 103), as if it were inching forward for hours. And did anyone else still know the full extent of shadow, which would have to include the shy, transparent darkness we find around the navel in small pieces of antiquity, and which now can only be found in the concave shape of rose petals? The course of progression in Rodin's work lies in such barely describable steps. With the taming of light the next great achievement began as well, that quality which gave form to his things, that greatness beyond all measure. I refer to the way he comes to terms with space.

Here again, as so often before, he returned again and again to question things found in nature as well as individual art objects of sublime origin. They responded repeatedly with the constancy animating them, and gradually he came to understand. They revealed a mysterious geometry of space, which taught him that the contours of a thing must be arranged in the direction of planes inclining toward one another for a thing to properly take its place in space, to be recognized, as it were, in its cosmic independence.

It is difficult to describe this knowledge precisely, but we can observe how it was applied in Rodin's work. The given details are brought together with increasing energy and certainty in strong individual units, until finally they take form, as if under the influence of rotating forces, in a number of great planes, and we get the sense that these planes are part of the universe and carry on into infinity. There is *Youth of a Primitive Age*, who stands as if in an interior space. And *John*, around whom

Jean-Baptiste Rodin, *the Artist's Father*, c. 1860.
Bronze, 41.5 x 28 x 24 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





space recedes in all directions. And the whole atmosphere surrounds *Balzac* – but there are also a number of headless figures, the giant new walker among them, who seem to pass far beyond us, into the universe, to dwell among the stars in vast, unerring spheres.

But just as in a fairy tale, where the giant who has been overpowered makes himself small for his conqueror in order to submit to him completely, so was the master able to make the space he had won from things into something belonging entirely to him. For this space in all its vastness can also be found in those strange sheets of paper, which could easily be mistaken for the high point of this work.

These drawings from the last ten years are not, as they are often taken to be, superficial jottings or merely provisional, preparatory studies; they contain the ultimate expression of a long, uninterrupted experience. And this they contain, as if by continuous miracle, in what would appear to be nothing, in hasty outlines, in a contour derived breathlessly from nature, in the contour of a contour too delicate and precious for nature to retain.

Women Damned, c. 1885.
Bronze, 20.3 x 27.3 x 12.7 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Candot Foundation.

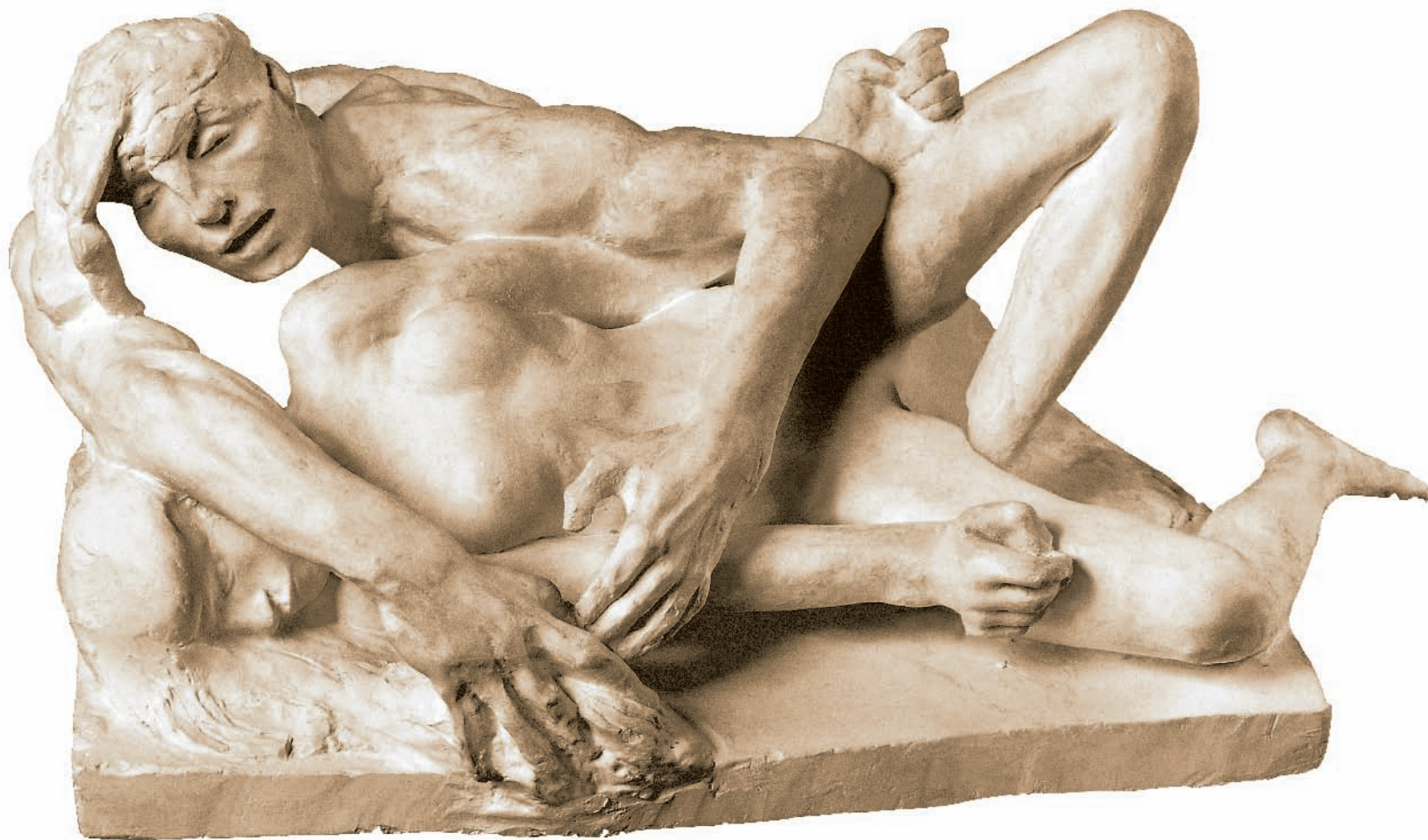


Lines have never been so expressive and yet so unintentional, even in the most extraordinary Japanese drawings. For there is no representation here, no plan or purpose, and no trace of a name. And yet, what is not here? What holding on or letting go or no longer being able to hold on, what bending over, stretching out, and contracting, what falling or flying has ever been seen or imagined that is not to be found again here? If they had been seen somewhere once, now they were lost: for they were so fleeting and fine, so far removed from a single meaning, that no one had ever been capable of ascribing them one.

And it is only now, when we see it unexpectedly in these drawings, that we understand this meaning: the extremes of love, suffering, despair, and bliss emanate from them, although we don't know why. There are figures that rise up, and this rising is as glorious as only a morning sun can be. There are light figures departing quickly, and their parting fills us with dismay, as if we could not live without them.

There are figures lying down, surrounded by sleep and dreams; and languid figures heavy with lassitude and waiting; and depraved figures who cannot wait.

The Sirens, 1880s.
Bronze, 43.2 x 43.8 x 32.1 cm.
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.



We see their depravity, and it is like the growth of a plant, growing in madness because it cannot do otherwise. And we can sense that there is much of the bending of a flower in this bending figure, and that all of them are part of the world, even those figures which are remote forever like signs of the zodiac, held fast in their passionate solitude.

But when one of these animated figures becomes visible beneath a light shade of green, it is the sea or the ocean floor, and the figure moves differently, more arduously, under the water. And a touch of blue behind a falling form is enough to bring space tumbling onto the page from all sides, enveloping the figure with so much nothingness that one grows dizzy and reaches involuntarily for the hand of the master who is holding the drawing out in a delicate, generous motion.

And with that, I feel obliged to say, I have shown you one of the master's gestures. You want others. You feel prepared enough to put together outward and superficial features, transforming them into pieces of a personal picture. You wish to hear the sound of a phrase as it was spoken; you want to enter places and dates in an atlas of this work.

There is a photograph based on an oil painting. The image, while indistinct, is that of a young man at the end of the sixties. The simple lines on the beardless face are somewhat hard, but the clear eyes piercing the gloom join the various features in the mild, almost dreamy expression young people take on under the influence of solitude; it is almost the face of a young man who was reading until it got dark.

But there is another picture, taken around 1880. It shows a man marked by activity: The face is gaunt, the long beard flows down carelessly to a broad, thick chest, over which the loose coat hangs. One feels as if one can make out reddened eyelids in the ashen, faded tones of the photograph, but the gaze from overtaxed eyes is resolute and confident, and there is an elastic, unbreakable tension in the bearing.

And then all at once, after just a few years, everything seems to have changed. Something final has come of what was temporary and indeterminate, something made to last. Suddenly this forehead is there, rocky and steep, from which a straight, strong nose descends with delicate, sensitive nostrils. The eyes lie beneath stony old brows, seeing clearly within and without.

The mouth of a faun's mask, half concealed and augmented by the sensuous silence of new centuries. And beneath it the beard as if too long restrained, cascading downward in a single white wave. And the figure bearing this head, as if not to be moved from the spot. And if we had to say what it is that emanates from this figure, it would be this: it seems to reach back like a river god and look forward like a prophet. This figure is not characteristic of our age.

While it is precise and definite in its singularity, it loses itself in a certain medieval anonymity; it has a humble greatness reminiscent of the men who built the illustrious cathedrals. The solitude of this figure is not aloofness, for it is based on a close connection with nature. Its virility is tenacious without being hard, which brings to mind a description offered by one of Rodin's friends, who would occasionally visit him in the evenings:

Avarice and Lust, c. 1885.
Plaster, 25 x 56 x 50 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

"When he goes, he leaves a certain mildness behind in the soft light of the room, as if a woman had been there."

And in fact, those select few taken as friends by the master have experienced his kindness, which is elemental like the kindness of a natural force, like the kindness of a long summer day, which nourishes everything and fades only late in the evening. But even the people who visited briefly on Saturday afternoons have experienced this, when they found the master among finished and half-finished works in the two ateliers in the Depot des Marbres. His courtesy gives one a sense of security immediately, but the intensity of his interest is terrifying when he focuses. Then he takes on a concentrated gaze that comes and goes like the light cast by a lighthouse, but which is so strong that one can feel it getting light far beyond the immediate object of his attention.

You will have heard many descriptions of the workshops on Rue de l'Université. They are sheds in which the building blocks for this great work are hewn. Inhospitable as quarries, they offer no diversion; designed solely for work, they compel the visitor to take on the work of observation, and it is here that many have sensed for the first time how unaccustomed they are to this work. Those who learned it left enlightened, and soon noticed that what they had learned applies to everything outside as well. But surely these spaces were most remarkable for those who knew how to see. They often came from far away, guided by a sense of gentle necessity, as if they were fated to stand here one day, protected by these things.

It was a completion and a beginning and the quiet fulfillment of a desire for an example somewhere among all the words, for the simple reality of achievement. And Rodin would join them, admiring along with them what they admired. For the dark and eminently unintentional method of his work, which led to a mastery of craft, made it possible for him to stand and admire the finished works once they were there, as if he had not wrought them himself.

And his form of admiration is always better, more thorough, and more filled with rapture than that of any of the visitors. His indescribable powers of concentration are always an advantage. And when he magnanimously dismisses any suggestion of inspiration with an ironic smile, and claims that there is no such thing as inspiration, but only work, one recognizes instantly that inspiration has become constant for this artist, and that he no longer feels it come on because it never leaves him, and one understands the basis of his uninterrupted fruitfulness.

He greets everyone he cares about with a simple question: "Has the work been going well?" And when this can be answered affirmatively, there is a satisfying sense of nothing more to ask. For he who works is happy. This solution was possible for Rodin's simple and undivided nature, with its vast sources of energy, and his genius made it a necessity. Only in this way could it encompass the world. His fate was to work like nature works, not like men.

Perhaps this is what Sebastian Melmoth⁴ was feeling when he went out alone, on one of those sad afternoons, to see *The Gates of Hell*. The hope of making a new beginning

The Three Female Fauns, 1882.
Plaster, 24 x 25.7 x 13.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





Female Faun Standing, 1884.
Plaster, 62 x 30 x 25 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Kneeling Female Faun, 1884.
Plaster, 56 x 20 x 28 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





may have flickered once again in his half-crushed heart. Perhaps, if it were possible, he would have asked the man when he finally had a moment alone with him, "What was your life like?"

And Rodin would have answered, "Good."

"Did you have any enemies?"

"None that could keep me from my work."

"And fame?"

"It made work a duty."

"And friends?"

"They expected work from me."

"And women?"

"I learned to admire them in the course of my work."

"But you were young once?"

"Then I was like all the rest. You know nothing when you are young; that comes later, and only slowly."

As for what Sebastian Melmoth didn't ask, it has been on the minds of those who observe the master carefully, astonished by the enduring strength of this man, by the youthfulness in him, which is as fresh and unpreserved as if he were constantly replenished by the earth.

And you find yourself asking impatiently again: "What was your life like?" If I hesitate to provide you with a narrative, as one usually does when describing a life, it is because the dates we know (and there are only a few of these) seem so impersonal and general in comparison with what this man made of them. Separated from everything that came before by the impassable mountain range of his mighty work, it is difficult to recognize the past. We have to rely on what the master himself has said on the subject, and what others have appended.

Of his childhood we know only that he was sent from Paris to a small pension in Beauvais when he was just a young boy. He quickly became homesick, and, being delicate and sensitive, he suffered in the company of strangers who treated him harshly. He returned to Paris when he was fourteen years old and learned to work with clay in a small art school. From that point on, he was happiest when his hands were in this material, which always held a strong appeal.

Everything associated with work gave him pleasure: he even worked during meals, or when he was reading or drawing. He drew when he walked down the street, and early in the morning he drew the sleeping animals in the *Jardin des Plantes*. And when the love of work failed, poverty drove him to it. Poverty, without which his life would be unthinkable; he never forgot that it made him one with the animals and flowers, having nothing among all those who have nothing, who depend on God alone.

When he was seventeen he went to work for a decorator, just as he would later work for Carrier-Belleuse (p. 52) in a factory in Sèvres, and for Rasbourg in Antwerp and Brussels. His life as an independent artist began, as far as the public is concerned,

Invocation, 1886.
Plaster, 53 x 24.5 x 26.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Meditation without Arms
(*The Inner Voice*), c. 1884.
Plaster, 147 x 76 x 55 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





The Farewell, 1892.
Plaster, 38.8 x 45.2 x 30.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

On the Seaside, 1906-1907.
Plaster, 58 x 83 x 50 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

around 1877. It began with people accusing him of having made the statue of *The Age of Bronze* (p. 44), which was being exhibited at the time, by taking a cast from nature. It began with an accusation. He probably would have eventually forgotten this if public opinion had not continued in a mode of accusation and rejection.

He doesn't complain, but as a result of the constant hostility, which has continued unabated, he developed a good memory for unpleasant experiences, a memory he – with his good sense for what is most essential – otherwise would have ignored. His abilities were already considerable at the time (it must have been around 1864) when he made the mask of *The Man with the Broken Nose* (p. 41). He had already done





Fallen Caryatid with Stone, 1880-1881.
Marble, 43.9 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm.
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collection.



Fallen Caryatid, c. 1883.
Marble, 50 x 30.5 x 26.7 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.





Christ and Mary Magdalene, 1894.
Marble, 84.5 x 74 x 44.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Man and His Thought, 1896.
Marble, 77 x 46 x 55 cm.
Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



a good deal of work as part of his obligations, but it was all marred by other hands and did not bear his name. The models he made for Sèvres were later found and acquired by Claude Roger-Marx; in the factory they had been discarded along with the useless shards.

Ten masks meant for one of the Trocadéro's fountains vanished from the spot as soon as they were placed there, never to be seen again. *The Burghers of Calais* never received the placement the master had suggested for them; no one wanted any part of an unveiling of this monument. In Nancy, Rodin was forced to make alterations to the base of the statue of Claude Lorrain. You may recall the unprecedented rejection of *Balzac* by those who commissioned it, on the grounds that the sculpture inadequately resembled its subject.

But perhaps you overlooked those newspaper reports of the plaster cast of *The Thinker* (pp. 42, 43), which had been erected provisionally outside the Pantheon, was vandalized with an axe. Were another of Rodin's works to be marked for the public sector, you were likely to have found a similar notice. For this list, which represents only a selection of outrages that seem to multiply endlessly, is surely incomplete.

It is not difficult to imagine how in the end an artist would move to take up the challenge in this war that was constantly being declared. Anger and impatience could easily have got the better of him, but entering the struggle would only have drawn him away from his work. Rodin's great victory lies in the fact that he persevered and responded to destructiveness the way nature does: with a new beginning and heightened productivity.

If I feared the reproach of exaggeration I would be powerless to describe for you Rodin's activity after he returned from Belgium. His day began but certainly did not end with the sun, for long hours lit by a lamp invariably followed. Late at night, when there were no models available, his wife, who long shared his life with touching support and devotion, was always ready to enable more work in his shabby room. She was invisible as his assistant, concealed behind the many humble tasks left to her, but she could also be beautiful, as the bust called *La Bellone* and a later portrait forbid us to forget. And when she too tired in the end, the mind of Rodin was so filled with memories of forms that there was no need to interrupt his work.

The foundations of his whole immeasurable project were laid in these years; it was then that nearly all the well-known pieces came about, and with astonishing simultaneity. It is as if the beginning of its realization were the only sign that it would be possible to complete such a colossal undertaking. This immense power would continue undiminished for years on end, and when exhaustion finally set in, it wasn't due so much to the work as to the unhealthy conditions in the sunless apartment (on Rue des Grands-Augustins), which Rodin had long ignored.

It is true that Rodin often longed for nature, and he occasionally went out on Sunday afternoons. But it was usually evening by the time he – walking along with the multitude (taking a bus was unthinkable for years) – arrived at the fortifications, beyond which lay

Dawn, 1885.
Marble, 57 x 57 x 35 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Madame de Morla Vicuña, 1884-1888.
Marble, 57 x 36 x 28 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Bernard Shaw, 1906.
Marble, 60 x 58 x 40 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





the countryside, indistinct and unattainable in the twilight. At last it was possible to follow his old dream, however, and move to the country; first to a little house in Bellevue and later to the high country of Meudon.

There life became much more spacious; the house (the one-storied Villa des Brillants with the high Louis XIII roof) was small and has never been enlarged. But now there was a garden, the cheerful cultivation of which became part of all that took place, and expanses right out the window: In these new surroundings it was not the master of the house who took up room and required constant expansion; now it was his beloved things that were to be indulged. No effort was spared for them.

He moved the Exhibition Pavilion from the Pont d'Alma to Meudon, and left that bright and lofty room to the hundreds of things that fill it now: a collection of classic statues and fragments, selected personally and with considerable care, has grown gradually along with this Musée Rodin. It contains a number of Greek and Egyptian works that would stand out in the rooms of the Louvre.

In another room there are paintings behind Attic vases, and the artists who made them can be easily named without looking for signatures: Ribot, Monet, Carrière, Van Gogh, Zuloaga; and among those remaining unnamed, there are several that can be traced back to the great painter Falguiere. Naturally, there are many dedications: the books alone form a vast library at once curiously independent of its owner and assembled with meticulous care.

All these objects are surrounded by mindfulness and held in honor, but no one expects them to contribute comfort or atmosphere. One almost has the sense that singular art objects of widely varying kinds and times have never been experienced with such intensity as in this place, where they are free of the ambition that often characterises collections, and where they are not forced to contribute their own beauty to a general sense of contentment that has nothing to do with them.

Someone once said that they are kept there like beautiful animals, and this does capture Rodin's relation to the things around him; for when he moves among them at night, cautiously as if not to disturb them, and finally goes up with a small light to a piece of antique marble, which stirs, awakens, and suddenly rises from its sleep, it becomes clear that Life is what he has been seeking, and what he is now admiring. "Life, what a wonder," is how he put it once.

Here in the solitude of his country home, he learned to embrace this life with ever more faithful love. It reveals itself to him as if he had been initiated, no longer concealing itself from him, beyond any sign of distrust. He recognises it in what is small and what is great; in what is barely visible and what is immense. It is in getting up and going to sleep, and it is there in his night watches as well. The simple old-fashioned meals – the bread, the wine – are filled with this life as well. It is in the joy of dogs, and it is in the swans and the brilliant flight of doves. Every little flower is filled with it, and every piece of fruit.

A simple cabbage leaf from the garden boasts of it, and rightly so. It shimmers merrily in the water, and it fills the trees with happiness. And how it takes possession

The Tempest, c. 1900.
Marble, 44.3 x 50.3 x 29.3 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

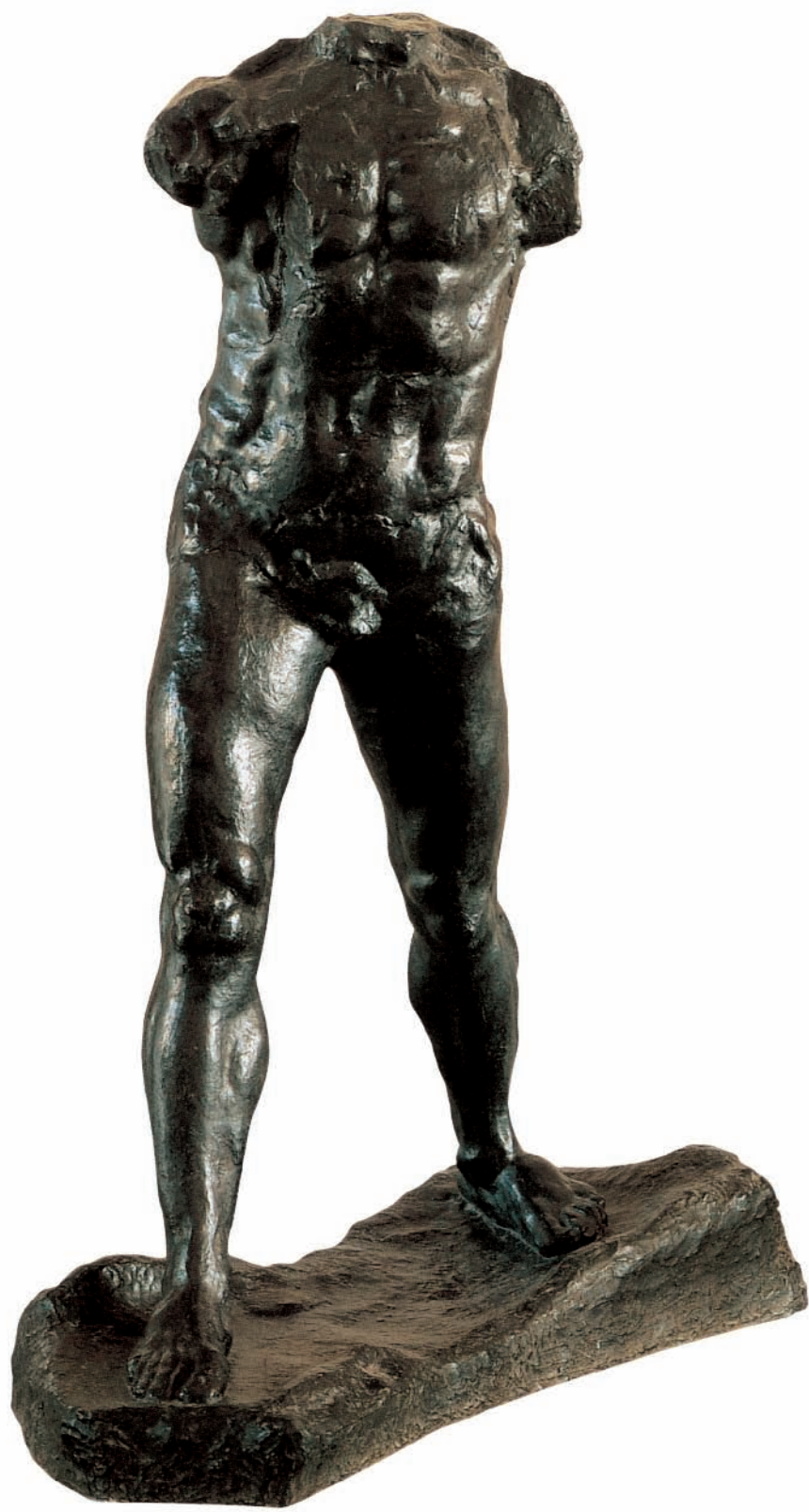




The Falling Man on a Corinthian Capital, 1882.
Plaster, 81.9 x 37.5 x 51.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Prodigal Son, c. 1886.
Plaster, 139.7 x 71.1 x 108 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





of men and women when they relinquish their striving. How well the little houses stand, just as they should, in perfect harmony. And how gloriously the bridge leaps across the river at Sèvres; pausing, resting, gathering strength and then leaping over again three times. And far behind it Mont Valérien with its fortresses, like a great work of sculpture, like an acropolis or an ancient altar. And these things too have been made by men who were close to Life: this Apollo, this tranquil Buddha resting on an open flower, this hawk, and then here, this lean torso of a boy, in which nothing is untrue.

Building upon these insights, which are invariably confirmed by things near and far, the master of Meudon's workdays proceeded apace. And workdays they remained, one like the next, except that now this too belonged to the work – this looking outward and being part of everything and understanding, "I am starting to understand", he often says, and with a certain reflective gratitude.

"And this is because I devoted myself seriously to something. He who understands one thing understands everything, for the same laws are in all. I learned sculpture, and I knew well that it was something great. I remember now how I once put sculpture in place of God throughout the *Imitation of Christ*, but particularly in the third book, and it was right in every sense."

You will smile now, and it is quite right to smile. The depth of this assertion is so unprotected one feels compelled to conceal it. But you understand that words like this are not made to be spoken as loudly as I must speak here.

Perhaps they only fulfill their mission if those who have received them attempt to order their life accordingly. Rodin, in any case, is silent like all men of action. He rarely presumes to express his insights in words, for these are the tools of the poet, and he modestly places the poet far above the sculptor, who, as he once said with a resigned smile, standing before the beautiful group titled *The Sculptor and His Muse*, "must make inordinate effort, in his dullness, to understand his muse." And yet what has been said of his conversation is true as well here "What a good meal, such enriching food!"

For the simple reality of the days he has experienced stands massive and reassuring behind every word he speaks. You can understand that these days are full. The morning passes in Meudon; often several works in progress are taken up in different ateliers, with each brought forward a little.

Business affairs intrude, bothersome and unavoidable. The master is not spared this worry and hassle, as few of his works are handled by art dealers. There is usually a model waiting already at two o'clock in the city, someone sitting for a portrait or a professional model, and it is only in the summer that Rodin succeeds in returning to Meudon before dusk.

Evenings there are short and always the same, for at nine o'clock the household retires. And if you were to ask about the distractions or exceptions to this schedule, the fact is there are none. Renan's notion that working *relaxes*, has never been more accurate than it is here daily.

The Walking Man, 1900-1907.
Bronze, 213.5 x 71.7 x 156.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Ecclesiastes, before 1898.
Bronze, 26 x 28.3 x 26 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Arched Torso of a Young Woman,
1910.
Bronze, 86 x 48.1 x 32.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Hanako, type D, c. 1912.
Plaster, 56.7 x 38.4 x 27.9 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris

Hanako, 1907-1908.
Bronze, 18 x 11.3 x 12.5 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris.

But sometimes nature unexpectedly prolongs these days, which look so much alike, adding time and whole seasons before the day's work begins; she doesn't permit her friend to miss anything. Happy mornings roust him up, and he shares in their life. He walks in his garden or he goes to Versailles to attend the awakening of the parks, as one once paid homage to the *levee* of the king.

He loves the calm of these first hours. "One really sees animals and trees in their environment," he says cheerfully, and he rejoices in everything along the way. He picks a mushroom and shows it with pleasure to Madame Rodin: "See" he says excitedly, "and that takes only a night; all these lamellae were made in a single night. Now that is good work."

Farm country sprawls beyond the edge of the park. A yoke of four oxen turns slowly, plowing ponderously in the fresh field. Rodin admires the slow pace, its unhurried deliberateness, its richness. And then he speaks: "It is all obedience." His thoughts pass through their work in a similar way. He understands this picture, just as he understands









the pictures sketched by the poets with whom he often passes his evenings. (It is no longer Baudelaire, but still Rousseau occasionally, and very often Plato.) And when the horns sound, quick and tumultuous, from the training grounds at Saint-Eyr, he smiles, for he sees the shield of Achilles.

At the next bend the road stretches before him, "*la belle route*," as level and long as walking itself. And walking too is a joy. This he learned from his time in Belgium. Accomplished in his work but for various reasons just mildly intrigued by his partner at the time, he stole whole days to be passed outside. He often had a paint box with him, but he used it less and less, for Rodin realized that occupying himself with a single spot would only divert him from the joy to be had from thousands of other things, which he knew as yet so little. And so this became a period of intense observation. Rodin has called it his richest.

The great beech woods of Soignes, the long white roads going out to meet the great wind of the plains, the bright inns, in which rest and mealtimes had something festive in all their simplicity (usually just bread dipped in wine – *une trempête*): this was the world of his impressions, in which each event entered as if with an angel, for he found behind all the wings of glory.

He is surely right to think back with a profound gratitude on these years of walking and seeing. They were a kind of preparation for the coming work, a kind of preliminary state in every sense, for it was then too that his physical condition took on the enduring strength that he would later exploit so ruthlessly.

Just as he took an inexhaustible vitality from those years, so even now he returns from a long morning walk, refreshed and eager for work. Happy as if he had received good news, he goes in to his things, and begins with one as if he had brought something beautiful for it. In the very next moment he is completely absorbed, as if he had been working for hours. And he begins, completing here and changing there, passing through the throng as if he were responding to the call of the things that need him.

He forgets none of them; those in the background wait patiently for their hour. As in a garden, not everything grows at the same rate. Blossoms stand beside fruits, and here and there are leaves on the trees. Did I not say that an essential characteristic of this titan is to have as much time as nature, and to produce with equal abundance?

Let me say this again: it still remains a miracle to me that there is a man whose work has grown to such extraordinary proportions. But I will never forget the look of alarm that greeted me once, when I used this expression among a small group of people, to evoke for a moment the enormity of Rodin's genius. One day I understood that look.

I was passing through the vast workshops, lost in thought, and I saw that everything was becoming, but nothing was in a hurry. There stood the completed bronze *Thinker* (pp. 42, 43), intensely concentrated within himself. But he also belonged in the growing context of *The Gates of Hell*.

Assemblage: left hand of Pierre de Wissant and Mask of Camille Claudel, c. 1885.
Plaster, 32.1 x 26.5 x 27.7 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





On the left:

Auguste Rodin?, *Eve*, after 1898.

Low relief in plaster,
131.6 x 46.7 x 17.5 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

On the right:

Auguste Rodin?, *Eve*, after 1898.

Low relief in plaster,
19.5 x 40.5 x 10.2 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.

Study for Eve at the Pillar, 1878-1880.

Bronze, 42 x 12 x 12 cm.

Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Sleep, between 1889 and 1894.
Marble, 48.4 x 56 x 47.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

The Sleep, 1890-1894.
Terracotta, wax, plaster, nails,
newspaper, 46 x 47 x 39.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



There was one of the monuments for Victor Hugo, advancing slowly toward completion, still under observation, open perhaps to alteration, and further along were other variations, still works in progress. The Ugolino group (p. 104) lay in waiting, like the unearthed roots of an ancient oak. Also waiting was the remarkable monument for Puvis de Chavannes, with the table, the apple tree, and the glorious spirit of eternal peace.

That piece in the distance must be a monument for Whistler, and this quiet figure here will probably make the grave of some unknown person famous one day. It is not easy to find a way through it all, but in the end I arrive back at the small plaster cast of the *Tower of Labour* (p. 54), which awaits a patron in its final form, someone who will raise among men the immense lesson of its images.

And here beside me is another thing, a quiet face attached to a suffering hand. The plaster has that transparent whiteness that can only be imparted by Rodin's tools. And on the stand, written and then crossed out again *Convalescente*. And then I find myself among new, nameless things in progress; they were begun yesterday or the day before, or even years ago, but they have the same equanimity as the others. They don't keep track of time.

And so I asked myself for the first time: how is it possible for them not to keep track of time? Why is this immense body of work continually growing, and where will it end? Has it no regard for its master? Can it really believe itself to be in the hands of nature, like the rocks for which a thousand years pass as a day?

And with some consternation I had the sense that all the finished work should be cleared out of the workshops, in order to see what remained to be done in the coming years. But as I was counting the many finished works – the shimmering stones, the bronzes, and countless busts – my gaze was fixed by the lofty *Balzac*, which had been rejected and returned, only to stand there proudly now as if he wanted never to leave again.

Since that moment I see the tragedy embedded in the magnitude of Rodin's work. I feel more strongly than ever before that with these things sculpture has grown to a prodigiousness that can only be compared to antiquity. And this sculpture has been born in an age that has no things or houses or external objects. For the inner life that makes up this age is formless and intangible: it is, in short, in flux.

It was left to this man to grasp it; in his heart he was one who gives form. He took hold of everything that was vague, developing, and constantly changing – all of which was in him too – and gave form to it like a god; for transformation, too, has its god. It was as if he had taken molten metal and let it harden in his hands.

Perhaps part of the resistance that his work seems to encounter everywhere can be traced to a sense of the force at work therein. In its time genius is always terrifying, but here where it constantly outstrips our age in its conception and in its realization, the effect is astounding, like a sign in the heavens.

One can't help but wonder where these things will go. Who will dare take them in? And don't they evince their own tragedy, these radiant, lonely things that have

Dance Movement G, c. 1911.
Bronze, 32.3 x 9.6 x 9.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Dance Movement A, c. 1911.
Bronze, 71 x 20 x 26 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Dance Movement H, c. 1911.
Bronze, 26.8 x 10.8 x 12.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Dance Movement A, c. 1911.
Bronze, 71 x 20 x 26 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

Dance Movement H, c. 1911.
Bronze, 26.8 x 10.8 x 12.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.





drawn the heavens to them? That now stand there freely, unrestrained by the presence of walls? They stand in space. And have nothing to do with us. Imagine a mountain rising up within an encampment of nomads. They would abandon the spot and move along for the sake of the flock.

And now we all are nomads; not because none of us has a home where we can stay and work, but rather because we no longer have a common home. Because we must always carry around what is great in us, rather than dwelling, even if just periodically, in greatness.

And yet, wherever humanity really becomes great, it desires a home of universal, nameless greatness. When greatness emerged for the first time since antiquity, in the sculptured figures created by men who were also nomads in spirit and filled with change – how it rushed to the cathedrals, taking refuge in the vestibules and climbing doorways and towers as if to escape a flood.

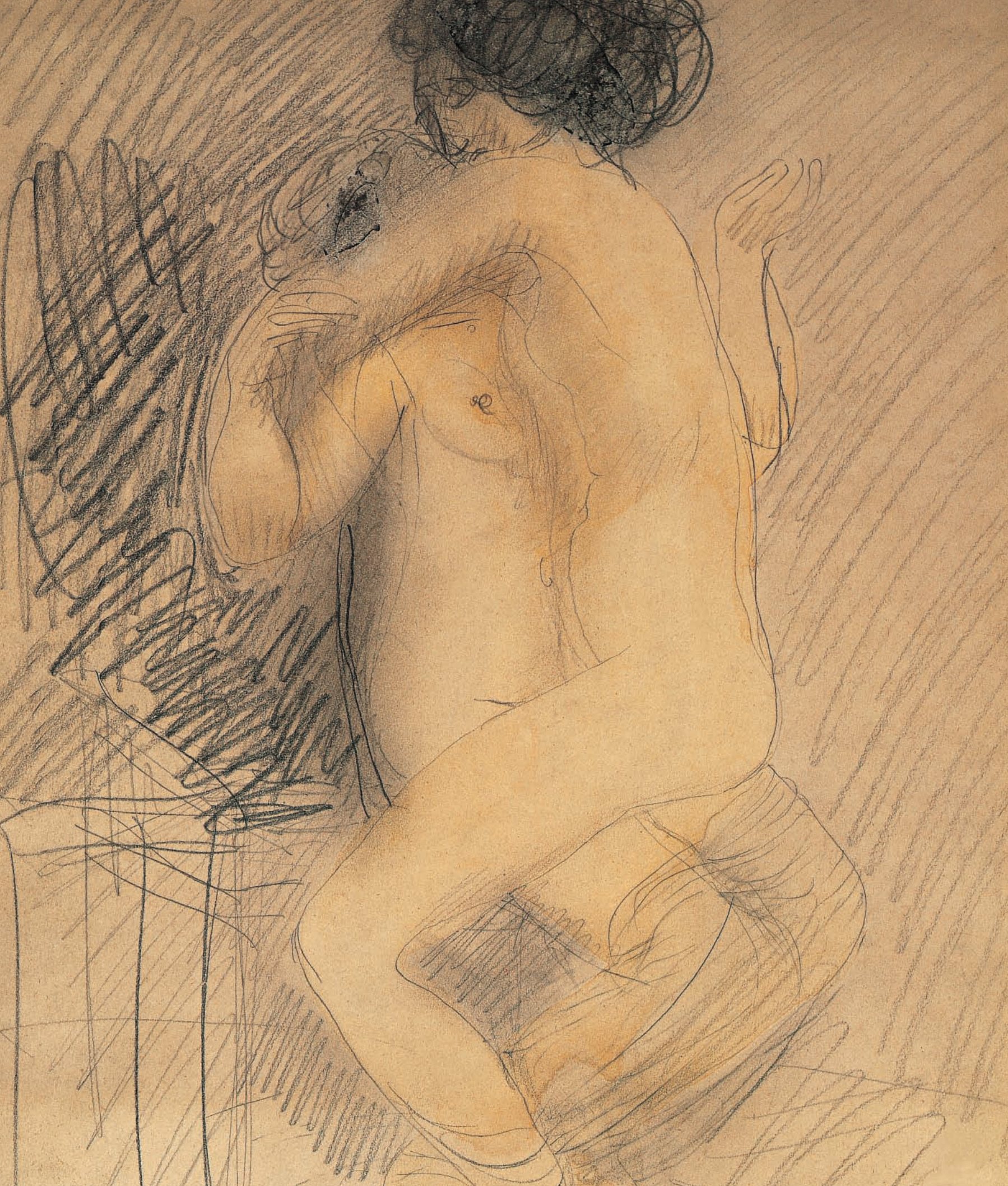
But where could Rodin's things go? Eugène Carrière once wrote of him, "He couldn't take part in the absent cathedral" There was no place for him to collaborate, and no one worked with him. In the houses of the eighteenth century, and in its orderly parks, he saw with some sadness the last face of an age's inner world. And patiently he recognized in this face the features of a fundamental connection with nature, a connection that has since been lost. He returned with more and more conviction to nature, counselling us to return "to the work of God, an immortal masterpiece and once again unknown." "Here are all the futures styles" he offers sound advice for those who will come after him.

His things could not wait; they had to be made. He foresaw their homelessness long ago. The only choice he had was whether to suffocate them or to give them the sky around the mountains. This was his work. He raised his world above us in an immense arc, and made it a part of nature.

3. This speech was written by poet, and author of this book, Rainer Maria Rilke. He delivered it at a conference in honour of Auguste Rodin, which was held by the Viennese librarian and editor Hugo Heller in his gallery on the 8th of November 1907.

4. After his release from prison, Oscar Wilde used the pseudonym "Sebastian Melmoth" derived from St. Sebastian and the title character of the novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

Dance Movement E, c. 1911.
Bronze, 37.5 x 12.2 x 26 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Rodin in Private

Rodin's erotic liberation was to come later in his life. "I did not know that, distrusted at twenty they [women] would charm me at seventy. I distrusted them because I was timid."

This excitement is immediately evident in the surfaces of Rodin's works, in particular his bronzes. They exude a sensual malleability, a fluent and vivid play of light and shade; they quiver and dance in a state of anatomical liquefaction. They seem to invite our own tactile response. And here it is worth recalling that Rodin worked primarily as a modeller. His marbles were largely speaking carved by assistants, copying bronze or plaster originals. Rodin himself very rarely cut or hacked or chiselled.

Instead, he pressed, rubbed, smoothed, caressed and moulded wet clay with his hands. The clay figure would then be cast in either plaster or bronze. The process of working was, for him, inherently manual, digital, ductile and seductive.

Works such as *Eternal Idol* (pp. 70, 71), *Vertumnus and Pomona*, *Toilet of Venus* (p. 90), *Torso of a Young Woman* (p. 165) and *Eternal Spring* (p. 88) make manifest this debt to an erotic muse both in the poses of the figures and the texture of the finish.

This force is essential to much of Rodin's art and is mirrored in many of the stories recorded about the man himself. These concentrate on his physical presence (despite or because of his small stature), his sexual energy, his hands, his piercing blue eyes, his heavy step. The prolific French diarist Edmond de Goncourt likened Rodin to a libidinous faun and recounted how at dinner with Monet and the painter's four daughters, Rodin had looked at each of them so directly that out of embarrassment one by one they left the table.

Another anecdote tells of Rodin reverentially kissing the stomach of a female model posed for him in his Paris studio (which is exactly what Pygmalion is doing to Galatea in Rodin's sculpted version of this myth, pp. 70, 71); the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (p. 157) relates how Rodin would take a huge draught of water in his mouth and spit it out onto the clay to keep it moist.

Rodin's Last Drawings

Rodin had drawn all his life, but the drawings he made from around the turn of the century (when he was sixty) to his death in 1917 are utterly distinctive. There are around eight thousand of them. Made either with pencil alone, or with the addition of pen and ink or colour washes, these late drawings are images of the most refined simplicity and concise beauty.

They divide into two types: female dancers, in particular Javanese and Cambodian dancers, and nude female models. Both types were made very quickly, in pencil, from life; some were worked up later. A few were made by tracing from the original onto another sheet – so as to eliminate superfluous lines as a further means of simplification; some were

Seated Sapphic Couple, after 1903.
Pencil, watercolour and gouache,
32.6 x 25.2 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Cambodian Dancer Fullface,
1906-1907.
Graphite, watercolour and gouache
on buff paper, 32 x 24.5 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

cut out and recombined with other figures. This method of working was highly unusual both for its speed and freedom. Rodin did not look at the page while he was working. Neither did he ask his models to hold any particular pose. Instead he drew as they moved freely around him, letting each finished sheet fall to the floor as he began another. The daring poses and viewpoints and the bold distortions that resulted are extraordinary.

This very innovative way of working coincided with Rodin's obsession with modern dance during this late period. In an article published in 1912, he claimed that "dance has always had the prerogative of eroticism in our society. In this, as in other expressions of the modern spirit, women are responsible for the renewal". All the great American

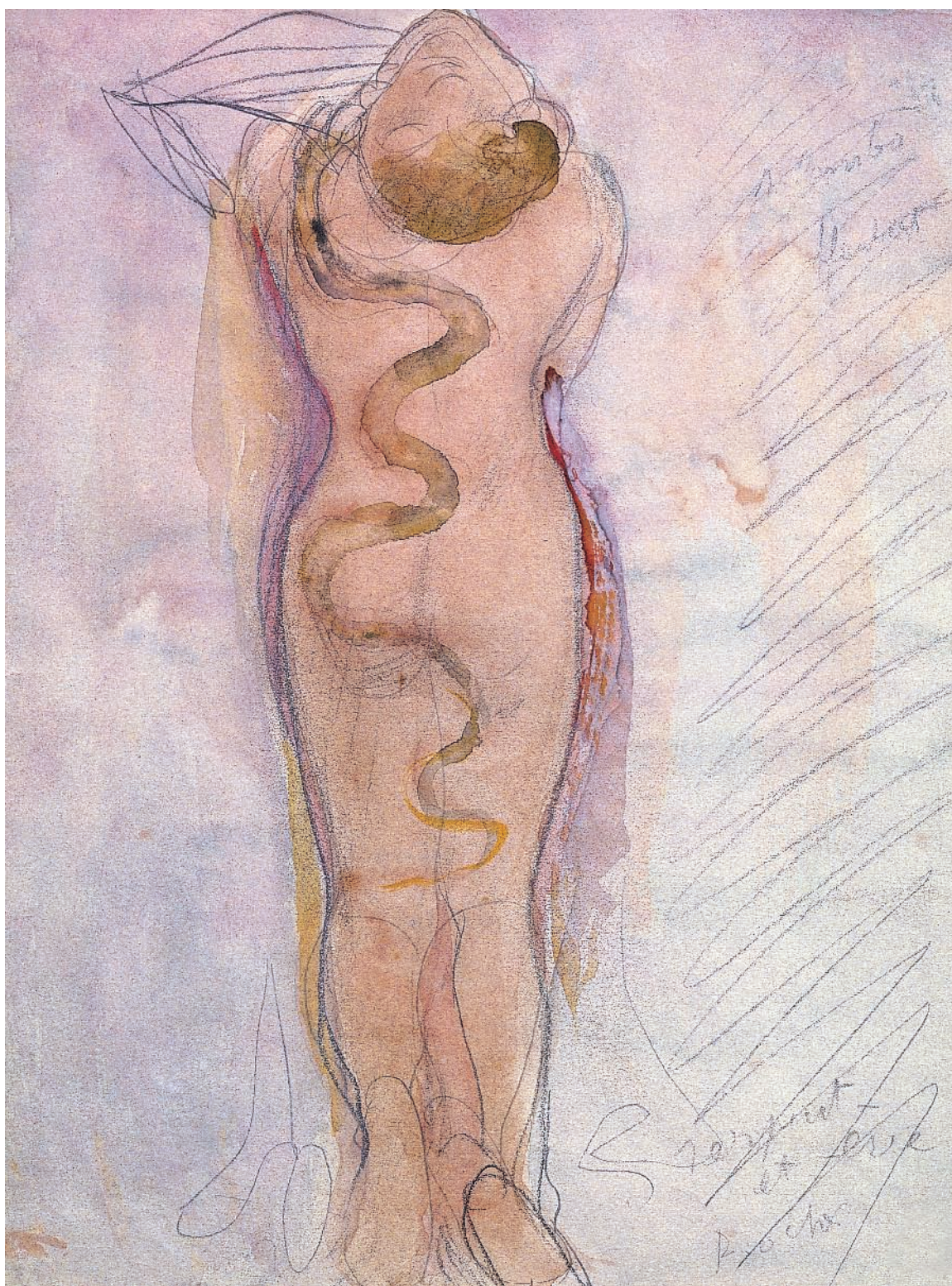


dancers knew him and all posed for him; the Russians Diaghilev and Nijinsky, the Japanese actress Hanako (pp. 166, 167), and the Americans Lois Fuller and Isadora Duncan. The latter describes how she invited the great sculptor to her studio in the early years of the century, where she performed one of her dances for him (he was in his sixties, she in her twenties):

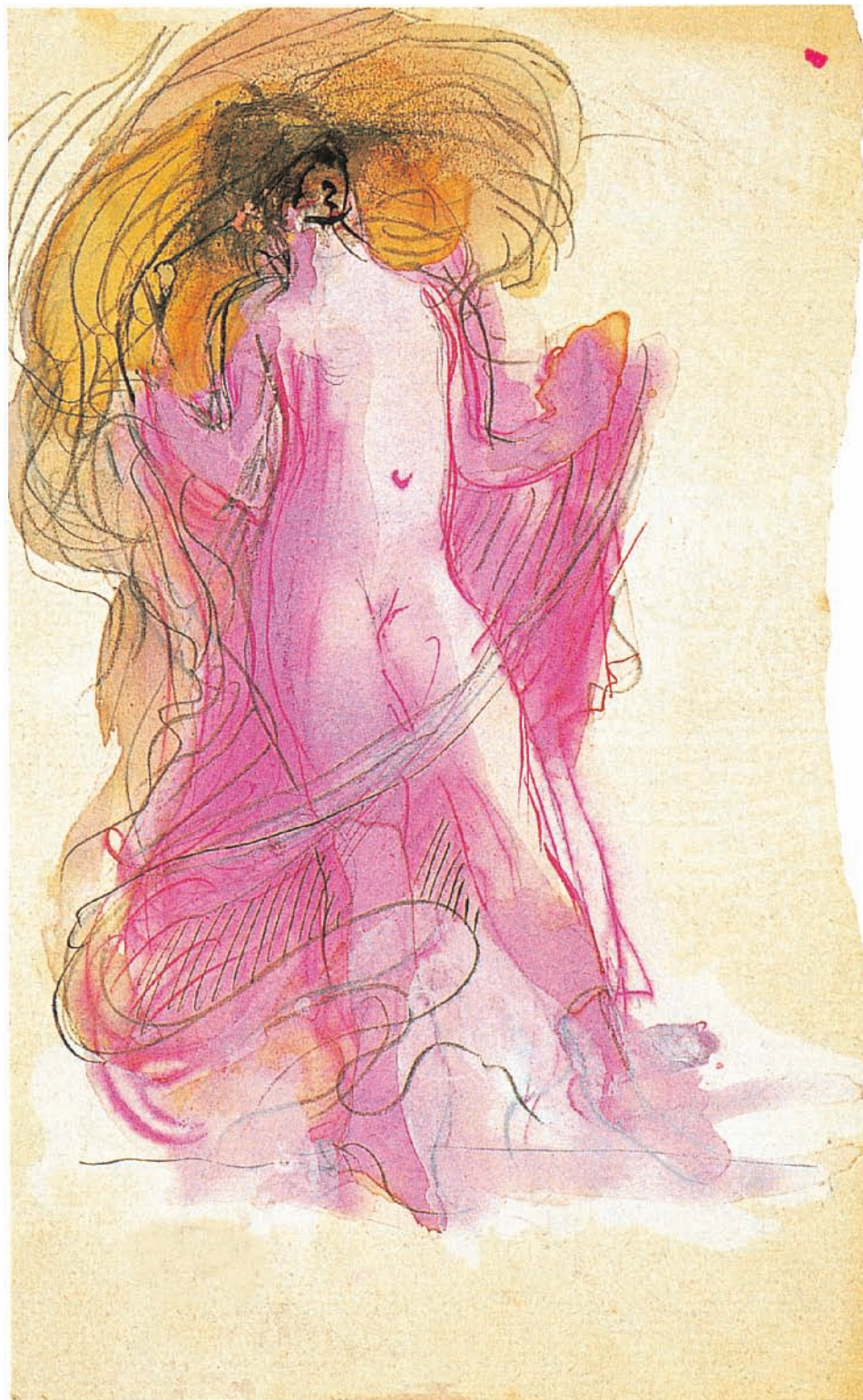
He began to knead my whole body as if it were clay, while from him emanated heat that scorched and melted me. My whole desire was to yield to him my entire being, and indeed I would have done so if it had not been that my absurd upbringing caused me to become frightened and I withdrew and sent him away bewildered...What a pity! How

Cambodian Dancer Fullface,
1906-1907.

Graphite, watercolour and gouache
with black pencil on buff paper,
32.1 x 24.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Serpent and Eve, before 1917.
Pencil, watercolour and gouache on
paper, 32 x 24.8 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



Nude in the Movement of Her Veils,
c. 1890.
Pencil, pen and ink, watercolour and
gouache on paper, 17.5 x 11 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

*Woman Lying on Her Left Side, One
Leg up, a Hand on Her Sex*
Pencil, stump, watercolour on
cream-coloured paper, 24.8 x 32.9 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.







often I have regretted this childish miscomprehension which lost to me the divine chance of giving my virginity to the great God Pan himself, the mighty Rodin.

When she opened her ballet school and she brought her students to Rodin's studio so that he could draw them. In 1906, Rodin followed a group of Cambodian dancers from Paris to Marseille for the same purpose (pp. 182, 183). His ecstatic response to these various dancers' elegant and liberated movement found expression in sculptural form (*Iris*; p. 92) as well as in drawings. Many of these drawings of nude models are of an intensely erotic nature; the ones illustrated here are among them. They are unlike anything else by his hand. Rodin had produced erotic drawings at other times and under different circumstances, often for book illustrations. He had provided drawings for a privately printed edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1885) and for a limited folio edition of Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden (Le Jardin des supplices)*; but neither of these even palely matches the later drawings for obsessive, sexual concentration, energy and freedom.

The works by Rodin reproduced in lithograph for Mirbeau's erotic novel do not focus on female pudenda as do the later ones, although they are similar in style. The Baudelaire drawings are also far less explicit and were made in a darker, nervous and more agitated graphic style.

Certainly the troubled, painful character of these drawings as well as the sculptures, made at around the same time, are comparable in mood to the tone and atmosphere both of Baudelaire's poetry and *The Gates of Hell*. It seems reasonable to sense in works such as *I Am Beautiful (Je Suis Belle*; p. 122) for example, a guilty or morbid erotic vision in which sexual fulfilment remains unattainable. The later drawings display nothing of the self-conscious and virtuosic indulgence in such an oppressive expression of darkness, struggle and godlessness. They are of a different order altogether. Principally what distinguishes them is their quantity (generally unknown until quite recently); the fact that the vast majority were never exhibited; the innovative methods by which they were made and the uncompromising, obsessive nature of their subject-matter. Nude, female models are drawn, time after time after time, with legs spread apart. The vulva is placed at the centre of the image – this is the fulcrum or focus, as it were, of Rodin's old age. In some, the models masturbate and either mimic or perform acts of lesbian love. Categorically it seems that Rodin had left behind the guilt and torment of *The Gates* to enter a labial world of uninhibited exuberance and pleasure.

Reactions

Responses to these works have been varied. When a small number of them were shown in Cologne at an exhibition in 1906, the director of the museum concerned was forced to resign because of the furore that ensued. Rodin, as a result, became wary of showing these drawings in public. They were for the most part private works, which have only slowly and fitfully entered the public realm. They have attracted charges of voyeurism and of being merely the fantasies of an impotent old man and they have been dismissed as pornographic. Even so, taking his oeuvre as a whole, the range of erotic experience with which it engages is enormous. From conflict, estrangement, struggle and despair, from violence and seductive grief (*Christ and Mary Magdalene*; p. 152) to the liberation and

Seated Woman, before 1917.
Pencil, watercolour and stump on
paper, 31.3 x 20 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.



The Song of Songs.
Pencil and watercolour on
cream-coloured paper, 25 x 32.6 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

*Embracing Couple Standing,
Profile View.*
Pencil, stump, watercolour on
cream-coloured paper, 49.8 x 33 cm.
Musée Rodin, Paris.

energy of the last drawings: It is as if all human emotion could be conceived in erotic terms. A decidedly iconoclastic twentieth century artist, Jean Arp, wrote a short poetic tribute to Rodin, in which he lamented the advent of what he called the “*érotomachie mécanique de notre siècle*”, comparing this development wistfully against Rodin’s more humane achievements within an erotic sphere.

So as not to be disturbed, Rodin himself used to pin a notice to the door of his studio when otherwise engaged with one of his models: “Monsieur Rodin is away visiting cathedrals.” And in a figurative sense the statement was not untruthful. For the human body, in particular the female, was a temple for him. “The dazzling splendour revealed to the artist by the model that divests herself of her clothes has the effect of the sun piercing the clouds. Venus, Eve, these are feeble terms to express the beauty of woman,” he is recorded as saying by his earliest biographer.

As is clear in the way he composed *The Gates*, Rodin did not feel obliged to follow any paths set down already by literature. In fact, in other works he often only added literary or mythological titles once the figures had already been modelled. On occasion he seems deliberately to have ignored his literary source: in *Hand of God* (p. 59), Rodin models the divine hand caressing Woman or Eve into existence; she is born, not from Adam’s rib, but as an independent creature in her own right. From the forthright advances of Francesca in *The Kiss* (pp. 82, 83), to the man’s submission before his muse in *Eternal Idol* (pp. 70, 71) and, finally, in the late erotic drawings, it seems that, perhaps, the most relevant legacy the erotic explorations of his work (if not his life) have left us is this: of woman as the sexual equal of man.



Biography

- 1840: Birth of Auguste Rodin in Paris on November 12th.
- 1850: Rodin starts to draw.
- 1854: Enters into a special school for drawing and mathematics, called "La Petite École", and takes classes from Lecoq de Boisbaudran and the painter Belloc.
- 1855: Becomes interested in sculpture.
- 1857: He leaves "La Petite École" and attempts to enter into the École des Beaux-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 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* (p. 44) 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 Musée des Arts Décoratifs. He will work on the project for the rest of his life.
- 1881: Learns engraving with Alphonse Legros in London.
- 1882: Rodin does the figures of *Adam*, *Eve* and *The Thinker*.
- 1883: Meets nineteen-year-old Camille Claudel.
- 1885: The Municipal Court of Calais commissions a commemorative monument to Eustache de Saint Pierre (p. 27), which will become the *Monument to the Burghers of Calais*, inaugurated in Rodin's presence in 1895.
- 1887: Named a chevalier 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* for the Pantheon (*Victor Hugo, Seated*) 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 thirty-four. 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 (p. 53) with whom he has an affair until 1912.
- First exhibition of *The Thinker* (plaster/large model) at the International Society of London and then at the Paris Salon (bronze).
- Begins a ten-year-long affair with Gwendolen Mary John who later serves as the model for *Whistler's Muse* (p. 121).
- 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 commandeur of the Legion of Honour.
- 1913: Camille Claudel is committed to a psychiatric hospital.
- 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 (p. 110) on January 29th, but she dies shortly afterwards on February 14th.
- Rodin passes away on November 17th. *The Thinker* sits at the base of their tomb.

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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*.