

Auguste Rodin: 255 Plates

By Maria Peitcheva

First Edition

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Foreword

Born into a modest family, Rodin began drawing at the age of ten and four years later was accepted at a special school for drawing and mathematics called "La Petite Ecole". There he discovered his passion for sculpture. After initial education, Rodin continued his studies with Antoine-Louis Barye and Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse; three attempts to enter the Ecole des Beaux Arts were unsuccessful. From 1872 to 1874 he went to Brussels and in 1875 to Florence and Rome where he was most impressed by Michaelangelo's work. Rodin kept contact with Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and with the Symbolists through Jules Dalou. From 1883 to 1889 he worked closely with Camille Claudel. Rodin, whose art, starting 1889, already met with great admiration, was considered by the turn of the century to be the leading modern French sculptor.

Auguste Rodin won many honours. He was named Knight, Officer, Commander and finally Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour. He also received several honorary doctorates from various universities.

From the unexpected realism of his first major figure — inspired by his 1875 trip to Italy — to the unconventional memorials whose commissions he later sought, Rodin's reputation grew, such that he became the preeminent French sculptor of his time. By 1900, he was a world-renowned artist. Wealthy private clients sought Rodin's work after his World's Fair exhibit, and he kept company with a variety of high-profile intellectuals and artists. He married his lifelong companion, Rose Beuret, in the last year of both their lives. His sculptures suffered a decline in popularity after his death in 1917, but within a few decades, his legacy solidified. Rodin remains one of the few sculptors widely known outside the visual arts community.

Rodin was a naturalist, less concerned with monumental expression than with character and emotion. Departing with centuries of tradition, he turned away from the idealism of the Greeks, and the decorative beauty of the Baroque and neo-Baroque movements. His sculpture emphasized the individual and the concreteness of flesh, and suggested emotion through detailed, textured surfaces, and the interplay of light and shadow. To a greater degree than his contemporaries, Rodin believed that an individual's character was revealed by his physical features.

Rodin's talent for surface modeling allowed him to let every part of the body speak for the whole. The male's passion in *The Thinker* is suggested by the grip of his toes on the rock, the rigidity of his back, and the differentiation of his hands. Speaking of *The Thinker*, Rodin illuminated his aesthetic: "What makes my Thinker think is that he thinks not only with his brain, with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back, and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes."

Sculptural fragments to Rodin were autonomous works, and he considered them the essence of his artistic statement. His fragments – perhaps lacking arms, legs, or a head – took sculpture further from its traditional role of portraying likenesses, and into a realm where forms existed for their own sake. Notable examples are *The Walking Man*, *Meditation without Arms*, and *Iris, Messenger of the Gods*.

Instead of copying traditional academic postures, Rodin preferred his models to move naturally around his studio. The sculptor often made quick sketches in clay that were later fine-tuned, cast in plaster, and forged into bronze or carved in marble. Rodin's focus was on the handling of clay.

As Rodin's practice developed into the 1890s, he became more and more radical in his pursuit of fragmentation, the combination of figures at different scales, and the making of new compositions from his earlier work. A prime example of this is the bold *The Walking Man* (1899–1900), which was exhibited as his major one-person show in 1900. This is composed of two sculptures from the 1870s that Rodin found in his studio – a broken and damaged torso that had fallen into neglect and the lower extremities of a statuette version of his 1878 *St. John the Baptist Preaching* he was having re-sculpted at a reduced scale.

Without finessing the join between upper and lower, between torso and legs, Rodin created a work that many sculptors at the time and subsequently has seen as one of his strongest and most singular works. This is despite the fact that the object conveys two different styles, exhibits two different attitudes toward finish, and lacks any attempt to hide the arbitrary fusion of these two components. It was the freedom and creativity with which Rodin used these practices – along with his activation surfaces of sculptures through traces of his own touch and with his more open attitude toward bodily pose, sensual subject matter, and non-realistic surface – that marked Rodin's re-making of traditional 19th century sculptural techniques into the prototype for modern sculpture.

Rodin published and exhibited very few of his drawings prior to 1897. Furthermore, drawings that relate to Rodin's own sculptures are extremely rare; most drawings related to sculptures are records of them after the fact, as opposed to preparatory studies. His earliest drawings were studies from classical sculpture, particularly those of Michelangelo, which he produced in order to understand the artists' conceptions of form. Rodin drew directly from models almost exclusively after 1890. According to Albert Elsen, "Drawing and modeling [his sculpture] were distinct yet mutually supportive and cross-fertilizing in his art. Seeing and feeling the model's profiles through the point of this pencil and hands gave conviction to his fingering of the clay and draftsmanship. Drawing made the body's contours instinctive for the sculptor; modeling taught the draftsman what was essential."

Drawing was his means of discovering "truth" in life and in art: "good" drawing represented truth and simplicity in nature; "bad" drawing was self-conscious, mannered in its representation, and often displayed an ignorance of nature or inexact observation with attempts to mask it with artifice.

Rodin was a prolific draughtsman, producing some 10,000 drawings.. His drawings were seldom used as studies or projects for a sculpture or monument. Although the works on paper can only be shown periodically, owing to their fragility, the role they played in Rodin's art was by no means minor. As the sculptor said at the end of his life:

"It's very simple. My drawings are the key to my work."

Although he is generally considered the progenitor of modern sculpture, Rodin did not set out to rebel against the past. Sculpturally, Rodin possessed a unique ability to model a complex, turbulent, deeply pocketed surface in clay. Many of his most notable sculptures were roundly criticized during his lifetime. They clashed with the predominant figure sculpture tradition, in which works were decorative, formulaic, or highly thematic. Rodin's most original work departed from traditional themes of mythology and allegory, modeled the human body with realism, and celebrated individual character and physicality. Rodin was sensitive to the controversy surrounding his work, but refused to change his style.

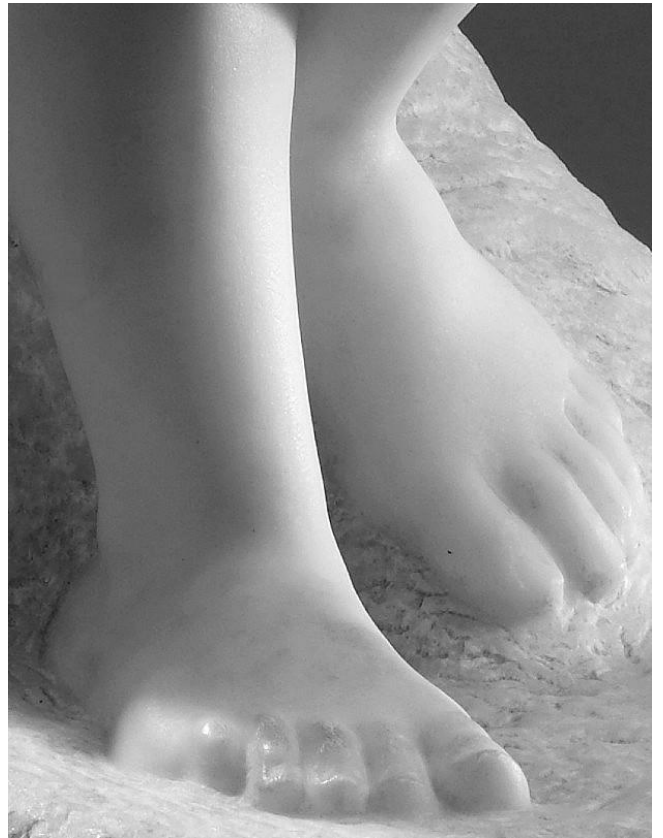
Sketcher, painter, engraver, sculptor and collector, Auguste Rodin is recognized worldwide for the exceptional authenticity of his anatomical sculptures. He strongly influenced twentieth century sculpture by his assemblage techniques and prepared the way for symbolism by adopting literary and mythological themes.

Sculptures



Eve, ca. 1883
Marble, 76.2 cm

Detail



Detail

