

# RODIN

SEX AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SCULPTURE



DAVID J. GETSY



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MODERN SCULPTURE

David J. Getsy

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*Page i* Unknown photographer, *Auguste Rodin*, c.1890–1900.

Photograph, 15.7 × 20.3 cm. René Huyghe Archive, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

*Frontispiece* Unknown photographer, *Auguste Rodin posing with "The Kiss" in Marble*, c.1898. Albumen print, 11.5 × 11.6 cm. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, gift of Albert E. Elsen, 1994.56.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The principle of Rodin’s work is sex,” concluded one of the sculptor’s most astute commentators, Arthur Symons, in 1900.<sup>1</sup> Then and now, this observation may seem quite commonplace, for Rodin’s reputation is largely inextricable from the sexual. Despite the ubiquity of this association, sustained analyses of what this means for Rodin’s work and for his place in modern art remain remarkably few.<sup>2</sup> This book seeks to address this question, but it will not do so by taking the expected path of examining Rodin’s erotic subject matter. The works that represent love and lust are many – from the widely reproduced *Kiss* to others such as *Eternal Idol*, *Eternal Springtime*, *Cupid and Psyche*, *Sin*, *Idyll*, and *Fugit Amor* to his hordes of frankly sexual drawings and sculptures of his female models. It has been primarily through discussions of these images of women and men that the erotic has been recognized in the literature on Rodin. Instead, I will provide a focused account of two pivotal moments in Rodin’s career at which he reconfigured the role of the modern sculptor through associations with the sexual. That is, this agenda manifested itself not just in his depictions but in the ways in which he conceived of his sculptural practice.

I make the claim that the theme of the sexual underwrote Rodin’s conceptualization of modern sculpture in fundamental – but as yet inade-

3, 4, 5,  
6, 11, 10

<sup>2</sup> (*facing page*) Unknown photographer, *Rodin*, n.d. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, Judith Cladel Papers.



3 Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*, c.1882/1898–1902. Bronze, 24.7 × 15.8 × 17.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson, 1942.5.15. Image courtesy Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



4 Auguste Rodin, *Eternal Idol*, 1893. Plaster with patina, 72.4 × 63.5 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris, s.1044. Photograph: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

5 (following page) Auguste Rodin, *Eternal Springtime*, 1884 orig, cast before 1917. Plaster, 66 × 70.2 × 42.2 cm. Rodin Museum, Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Paul Rosenberg, 1953.26.1.



quately grasped – ways. This theme manifested itself beyond lascivious or passionate subject matter. Rodin re-made the very practice of sculpture, both in his articulation of the role of the modern sculptor and in the technical and physical ways in which he made sculptural objects. There is little doubt that Rodin established himself as the pivotal figure in the founding of a new idiom for sculpture. I contend that the content of this contribution positioned the sexual, and with it the question of gender, as axiomatic issues transmitted to subsequent developments and departures in twentieth-century sculpture.

This book is an extended essay in two parts, and I shall not attempt to discuss the entirety of the voluminous body of work Rodin created in his long career. I see this book, primarily, as a focused interpretation of Rodin's sculptural practice; one that is intended as a means of entry into why and how Rodin came to be so variously fundamental to twentieth-century sculpture. In the course of working on this project, many colleagues and friends have voiced the desire for new and different ways of understanding Rodin as a sculptor. That is, the need has been not for further specifics about Rodin's career and context but, more importantly and more broadly, for a means to reconsider Rodin's sculptures themselves. Accordingly, in the second chapter I use the example of Rodin to develop a critical vocabulary for examining the often tense relationship between representation and materiality in figurative sculpture.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that this book will provide a means to move beyond platitudes about Rodin's style or the expected routes to interpreting Rodin's subject matter – both of which continue to put off a significant number of twenty-first-century viewers – and, instead, to reconsider the wider network of meanings located in sculptural practice itself. By sculptural practice I mean the range of negotiations made by sculptors with their own self-fashioned professional personas, with the material confines and possibilities of their technical and physical making of objects, with the conceptual frameworks through which they attempt to stage meanings for these personas and objects, with scenes of creation often (but not exclusively) located in the

studio, and with the exhibition, reproduction, display, and dissemination of these frameworks and art objects to various publics. Rodin is an exemplary case through which to understand the interwoven nature of sculptural practice, for he re-orchestrated the role of the artist in relation to his artworks and marshaled them, ultimately, as relics of his scenes of (sexualized) creation.

Rodin's technique and style have often been seen as a logical antithesis to the supposed strictures of academic conventions. As a commentator in 1918 put it, Rodin's art was "new as compared with the pretty rhetoric, the cheap flubdub, the insincere pose, the rose-tinted lie, the myopic vision, which could see beauty only in a minutely painstaking and polished 'finish' [...]"<sup>4</sup> This claim for Rodin's self-originating authenticity, itself, draws on a standard pattern in the narratives of the modern painter, and one could chart numerous parallel explanations for new stylistic developments in the stories of Rodin's peers.<sup>5</sup> Since Rodin's role in the history of sculpture is singular in comparison to his painter contemporaries, however, his "liberation" of sculpture is often inadequately interrogated.<sup>6</sup> He is seen to be wholly unprecedented and seminal, and the legends that have grown around Rodin propagate this mythology of rebellion and autogenesis. Thus, his fragmentary bodies and encrusted surfaces have come to seem self-evident and, for lack of a better word, "natural" in their rejection of the supposed confines of academic training and sculptural conventions. Viewers have seen freedom and spontaneity in his surfaces, and they equated this varied surface articulation with a rejection of ideals and norms of the past and with an embrace of immediacy and contemporaneity.

Accordingly, the mainstream narratives of modern art often credit Rodin with making sculpture expressive and with single-handedly establishing the sculptural equivalent of the modern "genius" artist. This characterization of Rodin, as will be seen, was reliant on and consistently maintained through the themes of sexual conduct and virility. The immediacy and intensity of his passion came to be the source for and the mean-

6 (previous page) Auguste Rodin, *Cupid and Psyche*, c.1898. Marble, 66 cm h. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of the artist, A.49-1914. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum.



7 Auguste Rodin, *The Sculptor and His Muse*, 1895–7. Marble, 66.3 × 58.3 × 53 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris. Photograph: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

ing of his signature style. “Art,” Rodin once remarked, “is only a kind of love. I know quite well that bashful moralists will stop up their ears. But what! I express in a loud voice what all artists think. Desire! desire! what a formidable stimulant!”<sup>7</sup> He provided a visual reiteration of this claim in his work *The Sculptor and his Muse* (1894) in which he depicted the muse imparting inspiration through her grip on the seated sculptor’s genitals. Symons, too, thought that, for Rodin “always, in the marble, in any clay sketch, there is ecstasy,” noting that “often it is a perverse ecstasy.”<sup>8</sup> Or, as Denys Sutton simply summarized it in his somewhat inflammatory yet aptly titled biography of Rodin, *Triumphant Satyr*, the sculptor came to be seen by all as “larger than life, dominating and fertile.”<sup>9</sup>

The example of Sutton’s later registration of the close association of Rodin’s influence with sex is the heir to the position developed by Rodin’s nineteenth-century critics and advocates alike. Following Symons, the principle of Rodin’s work appeared to many to be sex, in its magnitude and variety. (I discuss a range of characteristic responses in the second chapter.) For many viewers, his energetic nudes externalized passion, desire, and longing by making the straining, contorted, or fragmentary body manifest the effects of internal emotional states. Viewers were thus offered images of the acting out of extreme emotion that they correlated to their own understandings of their bodies’ capacities and their experiences of proprioception.<sup>10</sup> They did not require mythological, literary, or biblical references to grasp the meaning of these works, and Rodin regularly suppressed, swapped, or eliminated such easy routes to legibility. Instead, as Rilke wrote with reference to Rodin’s work, “The language of this art was the body.”<sup>11</sup> This language of the body, for Rodin, spoke most directly through the enactment or solicitation of physical passion. Love had been a subject of art for centuries but Rodin instead offered viewers works that seemed to bear the evidence of its eruption through and control over the body. As Paul Gsell reported Rodin to have said, “The human body is above all the mirror of the soul and from this comes its greatest beauty. [. . .] What we adore in the human body, even more than its beautiful shape, is the interior flame that makes it transparent.”<sup>12</sup> That





8 (*facing page*) Auguste Rodin, *The Prodigal Son*, 1885–7. Bronze, 138 cm h. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of the artist, A.34-1914. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum.



9 (*left*) Auguste Rodin, *Caryatid*, c.1891. Bronze, 44.5 cm h. Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mr. Robert Allerton, 1924.5. Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago.

10 (*below*) Auguste Rodin, *Fugit Amor*, orig. before 1887. Plaster, 53.6 × 84.5 × 32.5. Archival photograph of an unidentified cast (possibly Musée Rodin s.3000). Department of Image Collections Archive, National Gallery of Art. Image courtesy Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



interior flame shone the brightest when fueled by sex and love. As a means of visualizing the potency of the inner forces at work, Rodin's figures exceeded the normal capacities and structures of the human body, stretching beyond themselves and contorting around each other. In short, he made passion physical.

Beyond how he rendered bodies or what subjects he chose, however, Rodin's touch itself came to be seen through the implication of physical intimacy and bodily passion. Whereas eroticism had long been a central theme of art and artmaking, the understanding of Rodin's work and importance came to rely on associations with sexual conduct and identity. Sexual activity, in other words, became the leitmotif of his sculptural practice and the metaphor through which Rodin's way of making modern sculpture was understood and transmitted. As Léon Daudet wrote some twenty years after the sculptor's death, Rodin's sculpture "is the expression of physical love, of these disorders, of his sufferings [. . .] Rodin, tormented by desire and remorse, and kneading, with a thumb indefatigable, his ardent memories. Any production, literary or artistic, is a creation. To create, it takes two."<sup>13</sup> This image of Rodin's sculptural practice (kneading clay) as directly related to physical love and desire was central to the mythology of the sculptor that emerged in the twentieth century. As Daudet implied, when Rodin made a sculpture it was a sexualized creation resulting from the encounter with the clay ("it takes two"). For the sculptor who became known for leaving traces of his touch on his works, this connection was important and, ultimately, Rodin's acts of making were mythologized as acts of love, lust, passion, and desire, visible in and as the sculptor's touch.

Rodin, in part, appropriated into sculpture the notion of the artist as sexualized creator which had become a key theme for many French writers of his time (such as Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac, both of whom Rodin memorialized). As I discuss in the first chapter, however, he came to this position first through a process of identification and disidentification with Michelangelo, in which the questions of artistic identity and expressivity were tied up with sexual difference and desire. He did

this at a time when the idea of sexuality as a classificatory category was emerging in many fields of inquiry and coalescing into the broad discursive formulation that later, in the twentieth century, became central.<sup>14</sup> (It is worth remembering that the problematic case of Michelangelo concretely contributed to nineteenth-century debates that resulted in the definition of the category of sexuality.) Sexuality as a means of characterizing individual subjectivity came to be increasingly important to Rodin, for whom sexual themes and content became recurring primary markers for the emotive, the subjective, and the personal. By 1900, the focus of the second chapter, Rodin's work was foregrounding sexual activity and desire, seeing in physical passion the most potent means of making the human body expressive and meaningful. Again, this surpasses the more general question of the erotic to focus on intimate bodily contact and sexual activity as crucial analogies for his material practices, stylistic choices, and his formulation of the role of the modern sculptor.

In what follows, I have pursued a targeted analysis that seeks to indicate the centrality of the sexual as a conceptual framework for his practice rather than provide a comprehensive overview of Rodin's long and already well-documented career. Accordingly, I leave out many of Rodin's iconic works, seeking instead to develop an understanding of Rodin's sculptural practice which nevertheless informs all of his output and, in turn, poses questions to his legacy. My aims in this book, which correspond to the two moments chosen for scrutiny, are first to investigate the installation of the sexual at the core of Rodin's version of the modern sculptor and, second, to discuss the transmutation of this goal to the level of both technique and persona, which were themselves crucial to its transmission into modern sculpture. For both, I focus on scenes of creation or exhibition as the axes around which revolve issues of artistic practice, the attitude toward the artist and the art object, and the stagings of gender and sexuality.

The two moments I have chosen punctuate Rodin's development and mark the beginning of his mature career and his rise to popular acclaim. Both are widely considered in the literature as major turning points in

Rodin's work. The first is 1876, the year Rodin made his first trip to Florence to see the works of Michelangelo first hand as well as the year of his first major statue, *The Age of Bronze*. Rather than deal with this well-studied work anew, I have focused on a small group of problematic drawings made around the same time by Rodin after Michelangelo. In these oft-neglected works, he struggled to articulate a new expressive idiom for sculpture by negotiating the idiosyncrasies of the Florentine sculptor's rendering of bodies. These drawings represent a larger attempt by Rodin to update the sculptural medium and build on its conventions. They also register his burgeoning concern to make it direct and expressive. This struggle at this crucial juncture, I argue, positioned the question of sexual desire as the foundation for Rodin's understanding of how to make himself a modern sculptor and set the terms for his later inquiries into passion and its registration in the nude body. The second moment I discuss is 1900, the year of Rodin's major one-person exhibition outside the gates of the Exposition Universelle. This event catapulted Rodin to fame and infamy and secured for him a position as the prototype of the modern sculptor. I focus my discussion of 1900 on the *Gates of Hell* commission (begun in 1880), for it was in 1900 that this work was exhibited for the only time in Rodin's life. It was exhibited, however, largely bare and without the many figures that have come to be expected to populate its surface. Taking this as a cue to investigate Rodin's technique and its relation to materiality, I offer a larger discussion of what this exhibition of the *Gates* meant for Rodin and how it allows one to understand the meanings of his technique and practice in a more complex way.

Sculptural practice – that is, the technical and material process of fashioning a sculpture from initial conceptualization to ultimate realization of the physical object – has been much mythologized or, alternatively, taken for granted in accounts of Rodin. I argue throughout this book that practice matters and that much of the interest of Rodin's work is missed if one focuses solely on subject matter or the notion is left uninterrogated that Rodin's technique and facture are simply and naturally “expressive.” I hope to show that the sexual is key for understanding not just what Rodin

depicted in his sculpture but also how he considered himself a sculptor and how he decided to make his works. That is, Rodin's acts of making demand examination because, as I argue in the second chapter, the staging of that process lies at the core of how he and others understood his work.

\* \* \*

I have focused my attention on the sexual as it seems ubiquitous and fundamental to Rodin's practice and to the popular understanding of his work, both in his time and now. My main concern is not with positioning Rodin the person within general conceptions of sexual mores in his time but, rather, in a more focused manner, with questioning how Rodin's practice was imbued with that “principle” of sex. I do this, more generally, because of my interest in establishing the basis for how the issue of the sexual has been transmitted by Rodin's practice and how it has been registered, with great variety, by artists and viewers up to the present day. Rodin's emphasis on the sexual willfully exceeds its immediate context to become a covert component of the twentieth-century sculpture that took him, positively or negatively, as a starting point. Rodin is unequivocally and repeatedly considered the “father” of modern sculpture – an attitude which manifests itself everywhere, from the title of Penelope Curtis's textbook on modern sculpture, *Sculpture 1900–1945: After Rodin*, to the prime placement of Rodin's *Balzac* in the main lobby of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, when in 2005 the collection was reinstalled in a new building.<sup>15</sup> Even if twentieth-century sculptors largely departed from Rodin's style and subject matter, he nevertheless set the terms for modern sculpture, and in this book I argue that one of the central concerns transmitted by his example was the imbrication with issues of gender and sexuality. This has been my primary reason for focusing less on his subject matter and more on his ways of making, for it is the impact of the latter that continued to be felt throughout the twentieth century (even as his effusive subject matter came to look dated).



11 Auguste Rodin, *Sin*, after 1895. Marble, 63 × 39 × 30.5 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris, S.1114. Photograph: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

Some might consider such an inquiry into the sexual as a secondary topic and would prefer to sidestep this component of Rodin's reputation as the founder of modern sculpture. It is, however, not a secondary question or one that is applied retrospectively to Rodin's work. It was, for him and for his contemporaries, central to how they understood Rodin's work and who they thought him to be. As Anne Wagner force-



12 Auguste Rodin, *Love and Psyche*, 1894/1905. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photograph in the Department of Image Collections Archive, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, D.C., used courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

fully argued in an essay two decades ago, this *was* Rodin's reputation.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Elie Faure wrote after his death in 1917, "Certainly he left us the most powerful plastic expression possible dealing with the drama of sexuality."<sup>17</sup> Gustave Geffroy, writing almost thirty years earlier of the "saturnist dance of furious lust" in Rodin's work, similarly noted that "Love was not the sole generator of the forms and movements adopted by the artist, but it was a principal one. The passionate expression of desire and the mimicry of consummation have found in Rodin a poet both comprehensive and implacably true."<sup>18</sup> Love, passion, sex, desire – these were Rodin's core themes, and any understanding of Rodin's work or of the terms it set for subsequent modern sculpture is impoverished without them.

11

12

Any scholarly inquiry into the sexual incites resistance in some because it seems to be bringing private matters into public light. The sexual is resigned to and constitutive of the idea of the private, even though it is of necessity a recurring component of public discourse. In other words, the idea that the sexual is private and personal is used to regulate how and when it can be addressed and by whom, creating a situation where divergent accounts of the sexual can be censored for being immoderate, inappropriate, or “merely” “personal.” Rodin’s work, however, did not take such a cloistered view of the sexual. To the contrary, he traded on its exposure. His work became increasingly equated with sexual content, and even sculptures that may seem tame by later standards were deemed wanton. For example, when his famous *Kiss* was shown in Chicago in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition, it and a related sculpture were relegated to a private room accessible only by special request.<sup>19</sup> As his career advanced, he increasingly deployed passion as a universal subject matter to amplify and activate sculpture’s conventional reliance on the nude human form. This was not an ancillary mode or topic for Rodin but a sustained area of inquiry. To be sure, Rodin’s work is often frank in its eroticism. As Anne Higonnet remarked, “No one could draw or model female labia, vulvae, or vaginas as unselfconsciously as Rodin.”<sup>20</sup> Taken as a whole, Rodin’s body of work offers a sustained argument for the importance of addressing and embracing the sexual. In other words, this is not a “personal” issue for Rodin the man but a guiding conceptual question for his work, one to which he returned again and again in various media from the 1870s to the 1910s.

An example from one of Rodin’s most iconic sculptures provides a case in point. The failed monument to Honoré de Balzac of 1898 has been – in part, because of its failure as a monument – considered one of the first truly modern sculptures.<sup>21</sup> This much discussed work has also been cast as Rodin’s major struggle to visualize a new form of commemoration and, in particular, the abstract concept of “genius.” Balzac’s hefty body did not lend itself well to the traditions of the nude from which Rodin took his baseline formal vocabulary, nor could he merely replace the body with a



13 Auguste Rodin, *Portrait of Balzac*, 1893 orig. Bronze, 127.6 × 73.7 × 59.7 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Silvain and Arma Wyler, 1957.529. Photograph: Robert Hashimoto, © The Art Institute of Chicago.



14 Auguste Rodin's *Balzac* (1898 orig.) installed in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art, 2005. Photograph © David Getsy.

more idealized one. After attempting to sculpt the naked Balzac, he turned to the body in a different way. Using small models for the *Burghers of Calais*, Rodin engaged in playful experimentation with the figures, eventually adding an erect penis to one. This genital element was repeated across a series of sketch models, leading up to the plaster sometimes known as the “*Athlete*” (*First Study of Balzac Nude “F”*) of 1895–6, in which the hand grabs a wrist of a hand that, itself, holds Balzac’s penis.<sup>22</sup> All of this came to be covered in Balzac’s robe in the final monument but the overall form of the monument encoded the phallic underpinnings of Rodin’s visualization of genius. That is, while it is not necessary to know what Balzac is holding under his robe, nevertheless Rodin made it a

central component of his process of conceptualization of the work, equating sexual virility with creative genius. The ultimate form of the monument, with its rearing phallic shape, then, bears the evidence of these earlier stages and their conceptual themes as replicated across the studies for the work. Even the usually pious Albert Elsen could not help but remark on this theme: “The side views of the *Balzac* enforce its sexuality [. . .] His head has become a fountainhead of creative power, and by a kind of Freudian upward displacement it continues the sexual emphasis of the earlier headless nude study. What more fitting tribute to Balzac’s potency as a creator from the sculptor most obsessed with the life force!”<sup>23</sup>

15, 14



15 Auguste Rodin, *Balzac, First Study of Nude “F”* (also called the “*Athlete*”), 1895–6. Plaster, 93.3 × 42 × 34.5 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris, s.2274. Photograph: Christian Baraja/Musée Rodin, Paris.



16 Edward Steichen, *Balzac, the Silhouette – 4am*, 1908. Gum bichromate print, 37.9 × 46 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 33.43.36. Permission of Joanna T. Steichen and © Carousel Research. Photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

16 Much has been said about the destabilization of the conventional solidity and verticality of the freestanding statue as a mark of Rodin's break with the commemorative statuary tradition, but this same aggressive angle also registers the phallic content so important to his view of the work. His intimates understood this, as when Steichen photographed it in such a manner as to enhance its phallic qualities or when Rilke gushed that the statue was "The figure of a creator in his arrogance, erect in the midst of his own motion as in a vortex which catches the whole world up

into the seething head."<sup>24</sup> As Rodin made central to his statue of Balzac (and reaffirmed in other works such as his Victor Hugo), the sexual was the privileged metaphor for artistic creativity.

The story of the conceptualization and realization of the *Balzac* is a reminder that a central component of Rodin's impact on the twentieth century is missed if the importance of the sexual is overlooked – both in Rodin's own foregrounding of it and, importantly, in how widespread was the connection of his practice to sex.

To bring this point home further, an example of Rodin's sexualized reputation is in order. Published accounts with their careful discussions of the sexual were often limited by the mores and conventions of their time, and the published record will only ever give a partial view of the sexual. That it is a frequent topic in the published record on Rodin is, however, itself indicative of just how fundamental the concern was to the critical and popular understanding of his work. To counter the careful address of the published accounts by contemporaries and followers, I offer an idiosyncratic example, the pornographic extremity of which will serve to indicate the range of the wider, but often only partially recorded, understandings of sex and Rodin. The author is Eric Gill (1882–1940), the English letter-carver, sculptor, and Catholic theoretician. Gill became one of the central figures in the development of English modern sculpture and was, for a time, Roger Fry's favored sculptor. His style bears no resemblance to Rodin's; Gill's work is willfully archaic, stylized, and carved directly from the stone. Gill, like Rodin, made sexuality central to his work and to his conception of what it meant to be an artist, so it is not surprising to find in him one who is perceptive to this concern. Nevertheless, the vehemence of Gill's fantastic account of Rodin's studio practice is telling. The following comes from an unpublished story written in 1934. I quote it at length, for it provides a sustained account (however laden with Gill's own fantasy) of Rodin's reputation and the assumptions that could be projected onto it. Gill wrote,

You must first understand that M. August [sic] Rodin was by all accounts a very virile old man. As an artist he had immense genius &

naturally he was much admired by many friends – French society worshipped him. I don't think he was a very big man – but, as is common with those who are short of stature, he had a very big penis and unlimited appetite. Being the kind of romantic artist he was, he used models frequently & in addition to professional models many of his friends were pleased to pose nude for him. They regarded him as a kind of god and could refuse him nothing.

[. . .] So a sitting to M. Rodin always meant a certain amount of lovemaking & frequently a fucking as well. Doubtless they were not averse to holding the big penis & a man's balls are not unlovely and are lovely to handle. In the course of time it became M. Rodin's invariable habit to start the day's work by fucking his model. After that he felt ready for work; for then, as Robert Browning expressed it: "body holds its noise & hears soul fire a little." So if you were a model to M. Rodin you must, if you were a woman, expect to be fucked first. It is not recorded what the professionals thought about it; it is certain that the amateurs were delighted.<sup>25</sup>

As I discuss in the second chapter, Rodin's studio practice became the site of many popular fantasies about the artist and his erotic encounters. Such ideas became more prevalent around 1900 as more of Rodin's drawings and watercolors were exhibited. These, too, became fuel for Gill's imagination. He continued, "But M. Rodin, in addition to his powers as a man, had his extraordinary powers as a draughtsman, and, further, he had extraordinary zest & curiosity & interest in things. He didn't like fucking in the dark. He wanted to see as well as feel; & he wanted to draw as well as see."<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the crassness of Gill's language, one should be attendant to the interweaving of sexual desire and artistic practice in this account. Gill slips from Rodin's own visual pleasure to his production of artworks: "He wanted to see as well as feel; he wanted to draw as well as see." This elision of Rodin the man and Rodin the artist occurred via the display and discussion of sexual organs (to which he refers in detail in passages I have not quoted) and of sexual conduct. As I shall argue throughout, this

emphasis on physical passion as being the most powerful conduit of the subjective underwrote Rodin's development of the persona of the modern sculptor and became the aim of his technical, stylistic, and art-theoretical choices. For many in the early twentieth century, Gill among them, Rodin's work became synonymous with the sexual. This was the case even with works that did not appear blatantly to address it (such as many of the drawings). Gill concluded his essay with a fictional anecdote that indicates the belief in its covert presence even in the most saccharine works of Rodin:

One day a friend called on him in his studio &, in the course of his inspection of the works of sculpture, he noticed on the walls many drawings of landscapes. He did not recognize any of the places depicted, but he noticed that each landscape had written upon it the name of a lady. Thus one was called 'Lucy,' another 'Jane' another 'Annette' & so on. He asked M. Rodin about this. 'Why have all these land-

17 Cl. Lémery, *Auguste Rodin at the Hôtel Biron*, 1912. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, Judith Cladel Papers.



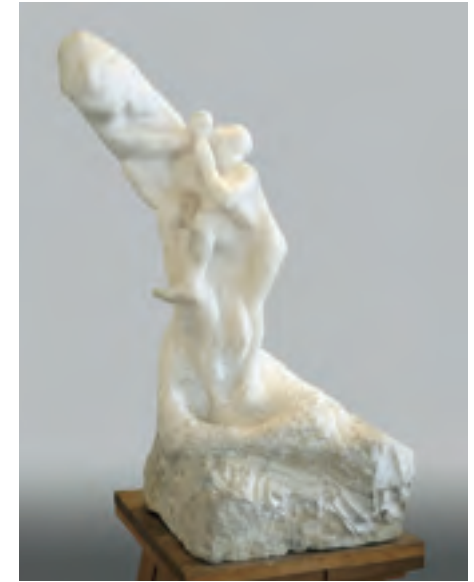


scapes got lady's [sic] names on them?' 'Ah,' said M. Rodin, 'if you'll keep the secret, I'll tell you.' and he pointed out that all the landscapes were fantasies & not drawings of real places, but if you looked very carefully, you could see that, hidden in the foliage & hills & trees, each picture had a woman's cunt. Lucy's cunt in one, Jane's in another . . . [ellipses original] and so each picture was, as it were, a shrine dedicated to one or another of M. Rodin's models. (Where are all these 'landscapes' gone?) (Do their present owners know M. Rodin's secret?)<sup>27</sup>

Buried under its blatant sexism, prurient digressions, and coarse slang, this strange fantasy offers an example of how closely linked Rodin's studio practice was to a popular understanding of his sexuality. Beyond the commonplace equation between artists' lives and their work, the case of Rodin revolves around an entrenched and mythological presence of the sculptor's desire as fundamental to and visible in his works – no matter what they depict. Gill's story about Rodin allegorizes this through the submerged imagery of the imaginary landscape paintings, slipping from his earlier accounts of the studio. Such a story is a symptom not just of Rodin's titanic fame but also of his reconfiguration of the role of the sculptor in relation to his work. Rodin, as I argue in Chapter 1, deployed sexual desire as a conduit for expressivity and for registration of the personal and the subjective just at the point when his mature career began. This emphasis became fundamental to his work, and, in Chapter 2, I talk about the high-profile display of sculptural materiality as the gendered counterpart to the sexualized sculptor in 1900. These two moments punctuate the development of the attitude that Gill, decades later, took as commonplace to the understanding of Rodin's sculpture.

The present book asks about the sexual origins of modern sculpture, as fashioned by Rodin, primarily through an investigation of his staging of sculptural practice. Readers will not find in it a sketch of Parisian sexual life around the turn of the century or attempts to argue for core commonalities about gender norms from among the millions of individual subjectivities that made up Rodin's community, class, city, nation, or era. Similarly, I do not attempt to tell the reader who Rodin really was or to

provide any new biographical context. His biography does come into play, but it is not the main goal. Instead, I have tracked the ways in which Rodin repeated patterns and methods as he staged his own activity as a sculptor. The shifts and continuities across replications of images and modes of practice are the bases from which I hope to define better the prototype of the modern sculptor that Rodin put in place, and to interrogate the meanings his work and practice came to assume. As such, this book has not been written primarily for the community of Rodin scholars but rather, in broader strokes, for viewers, critics, and historians for whom Rodin remains enigmatic despite his apparent directness and straightforwardness. Furthermore, a related goal of this study is to offer a more sophisticated way of talking about the shifts enacted by Rodin's inauguration of modern sculpture with regard to sculptural representation and its play between image and object. The second chapter, in particular, seeks to demystify Rodin's ways of making to show how they prompt the viewer to attend to the object-nature of sculpture. Rodin's saucy subject matter is solicitous enough and continues to attract and titillate (and repulse) viewers. What I argue is that this same commitment to the importance of physical passion was a component of his making of objects. Both his images and his practice turned on the ways in which the sexual became the crossroads of sculptural conventions of the nude, the persona of the modern sculptor, and the viewer's visceral encounter with objects that declared that they had been fashioned by his touch.



18 Auguste Rodin, *The Creation of Woman*, 1894 orig. Marble. Musée Rodin, Paris. Photograph: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

## NOTES

NOTE For all sources not republished in English, the translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 “Le principe de l’oeuvre de Rodin est le sex.” Arthur Symons, “Les Dessins de Rodin,” *La Plume* no. 268 (1900), 383. Anne Wagner first pointed to the importance of this statement by Symons in “Rodin’s Reputation,” in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 191–242.
- 2 There are, however, some notable exceptions, to which my thinking on the sexual in Rodin’s work is indebted. Most significant of these is Wagner, “Rodin’s Reputation.” Wagner’s discussion of the sexual content of Rodin’s depictions and its relation to his popular reputation is fundamental to my complementary analyses of Rodin’s sculptural practice and persona. Other notable analyses of eroticism and the sexual in Rodin’s work include Anne Higonnet, “Myths of Creation: Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin,” in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 13–29; Rainer Crone and Siegfried Salzmann, eds., *Rodin: Eros and Creativity*, trans. Jean Marie Clarke and John Ormrod (Munich: Prestel, 1997); Wilfried Seipel, ed., *Auguste Rodin: Eros und Leidenschaft* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1996); John Berger, “Rodin and Sexual Domination” (1967), *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 177–84.
- 3 In this, the present book complements my *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), in which I also used specific historical case studies to develop a critical vocabulary for the analysis of figurative sculpture.
- 4 Louis Weinberg, *The Art of Rodin* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1918), 20.
- 5 Most visibly, this pattern was exemplified and consolidated in Emile Zola’s 1886 novel *L’Oeuvre*.
- 6 Albert Elsen’s early work on Rodin acknowledged well the sculptor’s debt to academic practices, and this understanding was developed in the detailed work of Ruth Butler. Generalist accounts of Rodin’s development, however, often unquestioningly follow the heroic narratives that established the Rodin legend in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Albert Elsen, *Rodin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963), 13–19; Ruth Butler, “Rodin and the Paris Salon,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. Albert Elsen (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 19–49; Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 7 “L’art, vous dis-je, n’est qu’une forme de l’amour. Oh! je sais bien, des moralists pudibonds se boucheraient les oreilles. Mais quoi! j’enonce à haute voix ce que pensent tous les artistes. Le désir! le désir! quel formidable stimulant!” Quoted in Paul Gsell, “Les dessins de Rodin,” in *Douze Aquarelles de Rodin* (Geneva and Paris: Editions Georg, 1920), 11–12. Contemporaneous translation from Paul Gsell, “Drawings by Rodin,” in *Twelve Aquarelles by Auguste Rodin*, trans. Ronald Davis (Geneva and Paris: Georg Editions, 1920), 11–12.
- 8 “Mais, toujours, dans le marbre, dans la moindre esquisse de glaise, il y a l’extase. Souvent c’est une extase perverse.” Symons, “Dessins de Rodin,” 383.
- 9 Denys Sutton, *Triumphant Satyr: The World of Auguste Rodin* (London: Country Life, 1966), 11.
- 10 Rosalind Krauss argued that Rodin’s figures gain their potency through their violation of anatomical structure and the expectations of how bodies work. The unfeasible and unexpected contortions of the bodies have the effect of “teaching us something new in the very originality of its occurrence.” Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 28.
- 11 Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Rodin-Book: First Part” (1902–3), *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*, trans. G. Craig Houston (New York: New Directions, 1978), 6.

- 12 Auguste Rodin and Paul Gsell, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, trans. J. de Caso and P. Sanders (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 52.
- 13 “est l’expression même de l’amour physique, des ces désordres, des ses souffrances [. . .] Rodin, bourrelé de désires et de remords, et pétrissant, d’un pouce infatigable, ses ardents souvenirs [. . .] Toute production, littéraire or artistique, est une création. Pour créer, il faut être deux.” Léon Daudet, “La nouvelle orientation de la critique,” *L’Action française*, December 15, 1938.
- 14 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage, 1990). Foucault later summarized (and critiqued) one intention of this book as “a history of the way in which sex was obscured and travestied by this strange life-form, this strange growth which was to become sexuality.” Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 190.
- 15 Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture 1900–1945: After Rodin* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 16 Wagner, “Rodin’s Reputation.”
- 17 Elie Faure, “The Last of the Romantics Is Dead” (1918), in *Rodin in Perspective*, ed. Ruth Butler (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 158. On Faure, see Serena Keshavjee, “Natural History, Cultural History, and the Art History of Elie Faure,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 8, no. 2 (2009), n.p. (online journal).
- 18 “L’amour n’a pas été le seul générateur des formes et de mouvements adopté par l’artiste, mais il a été un des principaux. L’expression passionnée du désir, la mimique de la possession, ont trouvé en Rodin un poète compréhensif et implacablement vrai.” Gustave Geffroy, “Auguste Rodin,” in *Claude Monet. A. Rodin* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), 72. Compare my translation with Butler, *Rodin in Perspective*, 70.
- 19 Weinberg, *Art of Rodin*, 18.
- 20 Higonnet, “Myths of Creation,” 21.
- 21 Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1979), 35.
- 22 On the series of sketch models, see Musée Rodin, *1808, le Balzac de Rodin* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 1998).
- 23 Elsen, *Rodin*, 101.
- 24 Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Rodin-Book: Second Part” (1907), *Where Silence Reigns*, 135.

- 25 Eric Gill, “M. Rodin’s Secret,” October 23, 1934, Eric Gill Papers, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California Los Angeles, Series 1, Subseries II, Box 35, Folder 1.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 1876
- 1 However, the heroizing narratives that dominate the understanding of Rodin rely on a denigration of academic practices and a reduction of the variety of modes within them in which sculptors worked. This trope became widespread and, in particular, the sophistication and variety of mid-nineteenth-century sculpture in France, Italy, and Britain were retrospectively denied in narratives featuring the later nineteenth-century origins of modern sculpture.
- 2 Leo Steinberg, “Rodin” (1963), *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 393.
- 3 For a recent collation of some of the main instances of this see Claire Black McCoy, “‘This Man Is Michelangelo’: Octave Mirbeau, Auguste Rodin, and the Image of the Modern Sculptor,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 5, no. 1 (2006). For a discussion of the issue of modernity in some nineteenth-century French writings on Rodin and Michelangelo, see her earlier Claire Christian Black, “Rodin, Michelangelo, and the Discourse of Modernity: A Study of Rodin Criticism” (Ph.D. diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1998).
- 4 Kirk Varnedoe, “Rodin’s Drawings: 1854–1880,” in *Auguste Rodin: Drawings and Watercolors*, ed. Ernst-Gerhard Güse (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 19.
- 5 See, e.g., Léonce Bénédite, *Musée Rodin: Catalogue sommaire des oeuvres d’Auguste Rodin et autres oeuvres d’art de la donation Rodin* (Paris: Imprimerie Beresniak, 1924); Joseph Gantner, *Rodin und Michelangelo* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1953); Albert Alhadeff, “Michelangelo and the Early Rodin,” *Art Bulletin* 45, no. 4 (1963): 363–7; Casa Buonarroti, *Rodin and Michelangelo: A Study in Artistic Inspiration* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997); Black, “Rodin, Michelangelo, and the Discourse of Modernity,” 83–116.
- 6 Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 99–100.
- 7 Judith Cladel, *Rodin: The Man and His Art*, trans. S. K. Star (New York: Century, 1918), 99.

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