

The Materiality and Mythology of Rodin's Touch

Auguste Rodin has been understood by many to have inaugurated modern sculpture, liberating it from its conventions and traditions. While the singularity of this reputation could be contested, his work has often overshadowed his competitors and alternatives among the divergent routes into and out of modern sculpture across Europe. Across the twentieth century, his originating status was often assumed, and he became the sculptor against whom others were gauged in the modern sculpture's early development. That reputation has persisted, and he remains one of the most recognizable of modern artists globally because of his way of making sculpture. Then and now, his works have appeared direct and expressive, with dramatic gouges, marks, and finger impressions littering his surfaces. Previously, European sculpture had privileged the carefully detailed surface, often smooth and unbroken. It was only in sketch models that one might find such abbreviated articulations, traces of the plasticity of clay, or seemingly unfinished surfaces that have become characteristic of Rodin's hand.

Rodin not only retained such evidence of sculptural process; he elevated it as proof of his own acts of making. Viewers of Rodin's sculpture were led to visually reconstruct those acts, following the thumbprints, marks, and other remnants of his touch. He deemphasized narrative, and his nude bodies were often freed from any identifying story (or were only tenuously related to a recognizable character from mythology).¹ This practice left viewers with only the contortions of the unclothed body to evaluate, and they could imagine how Rodin's hands had brought that body—touch by touch—into existence. For these reasons, the viewing experience of a Rodin sculpture seemed more direct and unmediated.

Unlike much earlier sculpture, one needed no story or explanation to understand the electricity of touching a body or being touched. Rodin's contribution to modern sculpture was to bring attention to the material object as the product of the sculptor's hands, and he amplified that attention by sculpting naked bodies that seemed to convulse in space as the result of those hands. With Rodin's work, the sculptor's touch in the clay was often taken for the lover's touching of the nude—despite the missing limbs, contortions, or imprints of fingers and hands on Rodin's sculptural bodies. Under his hand, sculpture was seen to have become more sensual, and the evidence of his manipulations of matter reinforced the frankness that viewers perceived in the unclothed bodies writhing in passion, shame, heartbreak, or ecstasy. The popularity of Rodin's work rested on this elision of the sexual and the material.² His contribution to modern sculpture was to make it more physical, more palpable, and a closer record of the frenzied scene of creation—or at least that is what his supporters would have us believe.

In what follows, I will discuss the tactics used by Rodin to draw attention to his touch. He invented few new techniques; rather, he reorganized existing practices of nineteenth-century sculpture in order to foreground his own acts of making. Whereas earlier sculptors had focused on a finished and refined product, for Rodin it was sculptural process that was the main focus. He emphasized *facture*—the evidence of the materials and physical processes that the artist uses to make an artwork. I will discuss two main areas in which Rodin performed sculptural *facture*: first, his use of the multi-stage process of casting and, second, his foregrounding of the reproducible and temporary

plaster model. These sculptural practices were normally kept out of sight, but Rodin celebrated and showcased them. The secret to Rodin's success lies in the ways in which he brought to light his own process, prompting viewers to believe they were vicariously touching these sculptural bodies. Such material traces and performances of incompleteness became his signature style, and he became renowned for "inventing" modern sculpture that seemed so alive and direct in contrast to the seamless and glabrous surfaces of previous nineteenth-century statues. He did this by redirecting sculptural processes to manufacture evidence of his touch.

RODIN'S PERFORMATIVE MARK-MAKING: CLAY'S PASSAGE TO BRONZE

The mid-nineteenth century discourses of sculpture in which Rodin emerged had a highly vexed attitude toward the issue of sculpture's materiality.³ The term "materiality" refers to the constitution of the sculptural object by and as actual matter—stone, metal, wax, plaster, ivory, wood, and so on. A statue's image (for example, the human form) is created in and through the manipulation of the material, and the sculptor must negotiate to some degree the integration of or interference between sculpture as image *and* thing when creating a representational sculpture. Nineteenth-century practices often preferred to obscure sculpture's materiality.⁴ Viewers were not meant to look at a hunk of marble or a piece of bronze but rather were meant to *see* such images as mythological heroes, great statesmen, or beautiful nudes.

The practice of nineteenth-century sculpture itself ensured a division between the

sculptural image and its material constitution. Customarily, a sculptor would model the figure in clay. Because clay is a fugitive material, it needed to be kept damp in order to keep it from cracking and crumbling. Once the sculptor had completed the work, it would then be cast in plaster in order to freeze the form in a more permanent, but still inexpensive, material. In this process, the initial clay figure would most often be destroyed. This resulting plaster, however, could then be exhibited in hopes of convincing a patron to pay for it to be cast in bronze or carved in marble. From the first plaster cast, numerous additional plaster casts, marble statues, or bronze casts could be produced. The "final" statue we see, however, was often executed by a highly-skilled team of practitioners such as bronze casters, mould makers, and stone carvers who used a variety of technologies and devices to ensure that the image that had been initially sculpted in clay was faithfully translated a second time to its new material. Nineteenth-century procedures of sculpture relied upon this division of labor between the conception of sculptural images and the manipulation of sculptural matter.⁵ The actual practice of sculpture was not, however, categorically different from techniques used since the Renaissance.⁶ By the nineteenth century, the industry of sculptural production had become elaborate, with many specialist technicians and artisans employed to turn sculptors' initial models into finished objects in bronze or marble. The nineteenth-century sculptor's artistic labor was located primarily in the conception and initial modeling of the clay form, not in the creation of the sculptural object.⁷

Rodin, however, came to be seen as *more* than a creator of form, and his reputation became that of the virtuoso



Auguste Rodin (1840–1917),
Léonce Bénédict, mould maker
(1859–1925) and Paul Cruet,
moulder (1880–1966)
*Cast of Auguste Rodin's hand
holding a female torso*
1917
Plaster, assemblage cast directly
from Rodin's hand
Musée Rodin



Auguste Rodin
The Thinker
Modelled 1880 (cast 1904)
Bronze
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

maker of clay objects. He did not develop a comparable expertise in bronze casting, patination, or marble carving.⁸ As his contemporary biographer Frederick Lawton made sure to state (perhaps overly so), Rodin was always a modeler and never a practitioner, “[A]lthough occupied for many years in the studios or for the studios of sculptors as an assistant, he was never, as has been erroneously stated, a *praticien*, i.e. a rough or a finisher of stone or marble. Indeed this is the one branch of the statuary art which he has never practically learnt.”⁹ While no doubt Rodin did, in fact, have at least some hand in the early marbles, over the course of his mature career he came to invest primarily in the arena in which he performed best—the manipulation of clay. This facility became central to his reputation. One commentator called him a “veritable wizard of clay, marvelous giant, noble creator.”¹⁰ Emphasizing modeling and clay, Rodin began attempting to find ways to register his own act of making in the object itself, bridging the alienation of conception from execution. Not only did he begin to make his figures larger and smaller than real bodies, he also wanted his works to bear the evidence of *having been hand-made*. Even though Rodin did attempt to redirect sculptural subject matter to new and ever-more-provocative content, it is this display of facture that has often been seen as the most visible sign of and most generative influence on modern sculpture. And, for Rodin, this display of facture was predicated on the manipulation of clay. The American art historian Rosalind Krauss put it well when she remarked, “Rodin’s figures are also branded with marks that tell of their rites of passage during the modeling stage.”¹¹ Under Rodin’s hand, sculpture became

more physical, more material, and a closer record of the scene of creation.

These marks, however, are by no means direct or unmediated. We need to recall that most basic of conditions for the interpretation of nineteenth-century sculpture: the initial object created (the clay sculpture) is lost. We never see the material (the clay) that Rodin touched. This condition is largely opaque to many viewers, and it is frequently forgotten or overlooked (even in many art-historical discussions of nineteenth-century art) that the sculptures are the products of translation from an already secondary object, the so-called “original plaster,” to subsequent bronze casts outsourced to the foundry or marble sculptures carved by a team of specialized stoneworkers. This is the process that many earlier nineteenth-century sculptors struggled to obscure, characterizing the final marble or bronze as springing fully-realized into existence.¹² Rodin did not overturn this process—far from it. He did rely upon teams of specialists to enlarge his compositions (such as the monumental *Thinker* (p. 45), originally only 70 cm in height), to handle the technical difficulties of casting metal, and to carve the works into marble. In her overview of Rodin’s technique, the American art historian Patricia Sanders noted that “Although Rodin’s studio practices undoubtedly varied over the years, he seems from the first to have relied on specialists to execute his clay models in bronze or marble. If Rodin’s workshop grew with his reputation, by the turn of the century his studios must have teemed with assistants.”¹³

Despite what appears to be evidence of personal handling by Rodin, the objects we call his are—like most nineteenth-century sculptures—rarely the direct product of *his hands*, even though the enduring image

of Rodin is as physically present, touching each object in a way that is visible and recoverable on the surface of the sculpture.¹⁴ The French art critic Roger Marx, for instance, spoke of Rodin’s caress of the modeling clay even though he and his readers would only ever see bronze, marble, or plaster: “Under [Rodin’s] fingers the clay quivers with feverish throbs, and trembles with every spasm of suffering and anguish.”¹⁵ This focus on Rodin’s hands and evidence of touching was made central by the Bohemian-Austrian poet (and, for a time, Rodin’s secretary) Rainer Maria Rilke, who began his *Rodin-Book* by discussing them: “Instinctively one looks for the two hands from which this world has come forth.”¹⁶ Decades later, the British art critic John Berger remarked in his perceptive essay on the artist that, in all Rodin’s figures, “One feels that the figure is still the malleable creature, unemancipated, of the sculptor’s moulding hand. This hand fascinated Rodin.”¹⁷ What interests me here is the lack of equivalence between this perception of Rodin’s hands metaphorically hovering near the works—that is, his simulated presence—and the material parameters of the medium of nineteenth-century sculpture.¹⁸

“Expressiveness and not finish is [Rodin’s] ideal,” wrote the American painter Louis Weinberg in a remarkably perceptive essay written just after the sculptor’s death.¹⁹ Indeed, Rodin’s handling and sculptural style were intended to produce a set of specific effects. Instead of the often glassy, even surfaces of much previous nineteenth-century sculpture, Rodin left the rough with the smooth, leaving areas seemingly unfinished, with the marks of the chisel or the thumb still in them. He allowed unworked areas of clay to remain on the works, having them stand in for bodily

surfaces. Such strategies were not unique in the history of sculpture. Michelangelo, for one, had been a catalyst for Rodin’s development of his own version of the *non-finito*.²⁰ However, for Rodin it was not just that his works appeared to be stopped midway in the process of being made. The performances of incompleteness and unfinish were tactical stylistic choices repeated across the various modes and materials of his sculpture. In addition, he exaggerated the occasional use of approximated details and sketchy surfaces that other nineteenth-century sculptors would sometimes use. For Rodin’s immediate predecessors and peers, however, these tactics were largely limited to works that were either self-consciously preparatory sketches or modellos or (as in the case of Honoré Daumier) as an equivalent to the hyperbolic drawing style used in caricature. Rodin drew upon such precedents but pushed their tactics further. He incorporated them into finished works intended to be cast or carved, and he realized that the sketchy and abbreviated details could be read as more active and less fixed than seamless verisimilitude. He built into his process and exhibition practices the appearance of unfinish, of spontaneity, of his touch, as a means of bringing his works the vitality that he saw lacking in the academic style. Increasingly, most of his mature sculptures by the late 1880s began to look as if they are somehow *in process* and as if they bear the evidence of his physical acts of artmaking.

Again, this was not a casual or careless move on Rodin’s part; it was strategic. He staged these traces of his touch as more emphatic and more deliberate so that they survived the translation from clay to other materials. It is common for many viewers and critics to think of the



Maurice Alexandre Bauche
(1878–1956)
*View of a Room in the Exhibition at
the Pavillon de l'Alma in 1900*
Ca. 24 February 1901
Musée Rodin



Louis Morin (1855–1938)
The Modern Sculpture
 1900

marks of process on these works as if they were self-evidently indexical of Rodin's presence. As French art critic Gustave Geffroy put it, "The sculptor's intentions are moreover visible in each of his creations, in his passionate and yet gentle modelling and the caressing tenderness that he mixes with his virile assertions."²¹ Despite the fact that these marks appear to be traces of Rodin's actual, physical manipulation of the material, they *simulate* the directness and unmediation of Rodin's touch in defiance of the actual material history of the sculptural object as the product of teams of makers and multiple materials. This is an obvious point that is nevertheless often forgotten or overlooked when viewers and critics encounter a sculpture like Rodin's. But by recognizing their anxious relation to the multi-staged practice of sculpture, it becomes clear that Rodin's practice as a whole relies upon a different, and more infectious,

function for these marks—as *performative*, rather than just constative or descriptive, of Rodin's presence.

In making this claim, I am contending that Rodin's over-dramatic facture was more than just a *performance* of bravura handling in defiance of naturalism—it was akin to a *performative* utterance that declared Rodin's appearance as the primary meaning of the work. Performative utterances change the condition of the object to which they are applied.²² The classic example is the wedding ceremony in which two individuals are pronounced married, thus changing their legal and social status in the community. When using this concept to think about the function of Rodin's facture, I rely on the extended usage of it beyond linguistic manifestations to encompass acts and other visual signs. Following this usage, performativity can be productively identified in visual arts and communication. For instance, a clear example of visual performative would

be the target: any object on which the image of a target is drawn becomes, itself, a target.

Rodin's marks are, I would argue, subtler but no less transformative visual performatives. His activated surface traces relied upon the deployment and propagation of replicable and transmissible signs that, once recognized as such, transform the condition of the sculptural figure to foreground both its objectness and Rodin's share in the formation of that object. When the viewer's experience of the statue becomes interrupted by these marks that are recognized as not having to do with the sculptural image—be it a representation of a woman, a man, a couple, a thinker—they shift emphasis to the sculptural thing itself as the product and registration of Rodin.

All sculptures operate between image and object, between representation and materiality, but Rodin's intervention into the discourse of nineteenth-century sculptural praxis was to sacrifice verisimilitude, representational consistency, and the coherence of the figure itself in order to let his acts of making overtake the object even after the form had undergone material transcriptions and been the product of other hands. Rodin deployed signs of his presence that would survive the translations of a sculpture across materials but that always pointed back to the fact that the object was made *by him* and that this scene of creation was the primary source of significance for the object before a viewer. Whereas paintings, for instance, might exhibit facture or display materiality, sculpture under Rodin's hands mobilized facture so that it would subvert the multi-staged material vicissitudes of the sculptural form, allowing each (and every) sculpture to appear to have arisen directly from his touch. He developed

an equivalent mode of production to the heightened facture that had become an increasingly attractive option in painting at the end of the nineteenth century, but did so within a medium that relied so strongly upon lost "originals" and their multiple reproductions. In short, his effective transmuting of the sculptural object produced by *other* hands is different from the facture we associate with Rodin's painter-contemporaries' staging of directness in their unique hand-made art objects.²³

The literature on Rodin, from the late nineteenth century onwards, has largely accepted as an open secret the factitious status of Rodin's performative marks.²⁴ His friends and later advocates and historians all wrote with the awareness of this issue. The goal of the above paragraphs is not to expose the open secret but rather to argue that the uncritical acceptance of it obscures the more fundamental art-theoretical move made by Rodin's performative marks and transmuting effects. The significance of these marks is not that they are mediated. Rather, their importance comes from the ways that they capitalize on their own mediation. These marks overtake depiction and subject matter, becoming—I would argue—of equal or more importance to the statue's narrative, story, or identifiable subject matter. Rodin foregrounded technique and facture as a means to point back to his (mythical) acts of making the objects that bear these traces.

Ultimately, what I am arguing is that Rodin's contribution to modern sculpture was not only the seeds of abstraction, which is how his fragmentation of the body and fractured surfaces have often been interpreted. Subsequent sculptors did interpret this as a stylistic attitude toward verisimilitude, but Rodin's strategy was more complex. It involved redirecting the viewer's

attention from image to object as the site at which his hand would be most visible. The point is not that the marks are mediated or “fake” but, rather, that their emphatic overlay on the sculptural object—across its material transcriptions—effects a shift in what we look for in the sculptures. This is the basis of Rodin’s “liberation” of sculpture and what has been called the demise of the tradition of the statue.²⁵ Simply put, after Rodin, we increasingly have sculptures, not statues—that is, objects, not images. Rodin’s performative marks strategically masquerade as direct traces in order to convince the viewer that this untouched object had been touched by him. The false immediacy of these marks does not mitigate the fascination they inspire in viewers. This is because they effect the more insidious result of keeping the artist near, and Rodin’s presence becomes semantically fused with these objects because of the ways in which they short-circuit the distinction between sculptural representation and materiality—between object and image—that nineteenth-century sculpture had relied upon. This shift from sculptural image to sculptural object is, on the one hand, a fundamental contribution to twentieth-century discourses of modernism and, on the other, the precondition for Rodin making his own acts of making the denominator of meaning. The performative mark not only says that “Rodin was here” but also declares that the sculptural object is important primarily because of that claim.

RODIN’S RECOMBINATORY PRACTICES: PLASTER AND REPRODUCTION

There is a second arena in which Rodin effected his redirection from image to

object and from subject matter to his role as the artist. This was his exploitation of the replicatory possibilities of plaster casting and his willingness to break his sculptural bodies into fragments only to recombine them into new forms. Rodin’s innovation in working in this way was to tackle the material aspect of sculptural practice that most others kept obscured—plaster casting. The stages of sculptural making I discussed earlier were most often obscured or hidden by artists, who would have us forget about all of the mediating stages between clay and bronze or marble. Rodin, instead, allowed viewers to see clearly that the reproductive process of plaster casting was no less a place where Rodin’s hand could be felt.

Like many other sculptors, Rodin had multiple plaster casts made of his clay models. Unlike traditional practice, however, he would then consider these plaster figures themselves the raw material for sculpture, breaking them apart, recombining them, and further multiplying them. The American sculptor Malvina Hoffman recorded seeing these on the day she first gained entry in Rodin’s studio: “This is a day long waited for, and now it is better than I had hoped for. I examine all the marvellous fragments of small figures, arms, feet heads hands joints and fingers—lying in trays of sawdust—plaster casts of such delicacy & strength. These amaze one [...].”²⁶ These component parts became for Rodin a different sculptural medium than modeling and clay, opening new ways of conceiving of making. The French poet and critic Camille Mauclair provided a contemporary description of Rodin’s practice:

“He will be forever improvising some little figure, shaping the notation of some feeling, idea, or form, and this he plants in his door, studies it against the other

Auguste Rodin
Young Girl Confiding
Her Secret to Isis
1895–1900
Plaster
Musée Rodin



Auguste Rodin
I Am Beautiful
1882
Plaster
Musée Rodin





Auguste Rodin
*Torso of the Falling Man from
 The Gates of Hell, Also Known as
 Torso of Louis XIV*
 1904
 Plaster
 Musée Rodin



Auguste Rodin
*Crouching Woman,
 Also Known as Lust*
 Ca. 1881–1882
 Terracotta
 Musée Rodin



Auguste Rodin
The Gates of Hell
 Modelled 1880–1890
 (cast 1926–1928)
 Bronze
 Musée Rodin

figures, then takes it out again, and if need be, breaks it up and uses the fragments for other attempts.²⁷

That is, with his replication of casts and his willingness to break and reuse them, Rodin invested in the plaster cast itself as the medium of sculpture. He would add elements to his plasters, duplicate them, pair them, stick them together, recombine them repeatedly, and generally used the fragmentary statuettes as individual building blocks with which he experimented with sculptural form. The practice of casting allowed for the multiple re-creation of sculptures, and each new combination could subsequently be re-cast as a new object. In short, he made sculpture from his own sculptures.²⁸ For example, he would sometimes fuse figures from two pre-existing studies, such as with the group *I am beautiful* (p. 53), into which the torso of the *Falling Man* (p. 54) and the *Crouching Woman* (p. 55) have been combined. As the American art historian Leo Steinberg remarked, “No Rodin sculpture is known until it is known in its adaptability.”²⁹ If anything, this was Rodin’s major innovation in the practice of nineteenth-century sculpture. Whereas the staging of materiality and facture can be seen, admittedly in less emphatic degrees, in earlier sculptural modes back through the Renaissance, Rodin’s deployment of the replicable plaster cast was largely unprecedented.

Rodin expanded upon the reproducibility that was fundamental to the practice of nineteenth-century sculpture but that most sculptors kept obscured. For a medium built upon the replication of form across different materials—from clay to plaster to bronze or marble—Rodin instead chose to showcase that potential for replication in the figures that populate his Inferno. Even a cursory look at Rodin’s compendium

work, *The Gates of Hell* (p. 56), reveals that the same figures are repeated across the surface, in different orientations and combinations. For instance, the torso of the *Falling Man* clearly re-appears not once but twice across the *Gates*, as do other figures such as the *Crouching Woman* and *The Prodigal Son* (p. 59). As Krauss remarked of this figure, “The double appearance is extremely conspicuous, and the very persistence of that doubling cannot be read as accidental.”³⁰ There are many such instances of the blatant repetition of the same figure or fragment, in different orientations and combinations.³¹ This is most obvious in the *Three Shades*, before 1886, that top the *Gates*. They are clearly the exact same figure repeated three times, without variation.³²

The plaster cast—rather than just being the mechanical reproduction of a “real” sculpture—became instead for Rodin a means to generate and to conceptualize new work. He reminded viewers that the individual figures were replicable objects. His repeated figures were not just images of bodies, they were physical units that could be reproduced, repositioned, and recombined both in the surface and in the scores of related works. That is, Rodin denied the individual uniqueness of these figures, claiming them instead as objects that gained their potency through the particular context and orientation he gave to them.³³ He supplemented a similar mythic role of the sculptor by demonstrating his ability to give new meanings to his statuettes merely through the way he placed, combined, and recycled them (as with his nearly four-decade-long process of revision of the surface of the *Gates of Hell*). He exploited the reproducibility of the plaster statuette, repackaging its potential for mass production as the site of creativity and variability.

As Rilke noted, “We see men and women, and again men and women. And the longer one looks, the more does even this content become simplified, and one sees: *Things*.”³⁴ Rodin accomplished this by supplanting narrative and sculptural depiction with an assertion of his own acts of creation. These units became an additional way of pointing back to Rodin’s hands and handling. As with the emphatic and performative marks in the lost clay models, the use of replication and recombination of his figures makes their individual depictions subordinate to the awareness of them as objects made and manipulated by him. Rodin’s hand metaphorically hovered near not just the clay but the plaster as well.

Rodin’s most influential contribution came not from his liberated and tortured subject matter nor from the way his style seemed to reiterate that purported freedom and expressivity. Rather, Rodin’s fundamental impact was rooted in his reorientation of sculptural practice. By shifting focus from sculptural image to sculptural object and placing his own performed presence as the mediator, Rodin raised the question of the object-nature of sculpture and its relation to its makers and viewers. This move from depicted image to made object (and the concomitant activation of the sculptor’s persona) emerged as a central question for subsequent sculptors—regardless of their embrace or disdain for Rodin’s subject matter or embellished style. Such modernist ideals as truth to materials and direct carving are in many ways answers to the questions that Rodin raised with his version of modern sculpture. That is, one should understand Rodin’s contribution to modern sculpture as an incipient performance of sculpture’s *objecthood*. While his sculptures still depicted bodies, he asked viewers to

see those sculptural bodies as things (as Rilke said) and not just as three-dimensional images. His mythical acts of making all pointed to his making of the sculptural object, and his works ask viewers to imagine touching the sculptural bodies that Rodin formed out of clay. Viewers rarely saw the clay, just Rodin’s objects (made by other hands). These objects prompted viewers to imagine these sculptures’ scenes of making. Rather than any recognizable subject matter or narrative, this mythology propagated by Rodin’s sculptures centered on his material touch.



Auguste Rodin
The Shade
Modelled 1880
(cast 1903–1904)
Plaster
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek



Auguste Rodin
The Prodigal Son
Modelled 1884
(carved latest 1899)
Limestone
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

NOTES

This essay has been excerpted and adapted by the author from chapter 2 of David J. Getsy, *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

- 1 While he often tended to render arbitrary or to mitigate subject matter and narrative contexts, Rodin sometimes had deep and complex engagements with sources that inspired his attention to bodies and their contortions. For instance, see Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, “A Hysterical Reading of Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*,” *Art History* 36, no. 5 (November 2013): pp. 994–1017; Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, “Genius and Degeneracy: Auguste Rodin and the *Monument to Balzac*,” in Sophie Leroy, ed., *Medicine and Malady: Representing Affliction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 217–50; and Juliet Bellow, “Hand Dance: Auguste Rodin’s Drawings of the Cambodian Royal Ballet,” *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 3 (July 2019): pp. 37–65.
- 2 This case is made more extensively in the full chapter of which the present essay is an excerpt.
- 3 See, for instance, Jeanne Wasserman, *Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum and Harvard University Press, 1976); Charles Millard, “Sculpture and Theory in Nineteenth Century France,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 1 (Fall 1975): pp. 15–20; Anthony Hughes and Erich Ranfft, eds., *Sculpture and Its Reproductions* (London: Reaktion, 1997).
- 4 Alex Potts has convincingly argued that there is a degree of engagement with materiality and objecthood in the work of Antonio Canova. See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 38–59. Contemporary with Rodin, there are further examples of sculptors who foreground materiality, for instance in the work of Hamo Thornycroft and Alfred Gilbert. See David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), chapters 2 and 3.
- 5 See Albert Elsen, “Rodin’s ‘Perfect Collaborator,’ Henri Lebossé,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. A. Elsen (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), pp. 248–59.
- 6 For a useful and concise discussion of earlier practices of casting, see Henry Moore Institute, *Bronze: The Power of Life and Death* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2005) and Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1993). See also Michael Wayne Cole, *Cellini and the Principles of Sculpture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peta Motture, ed., *Large bronzes in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Debra Pincus, ed., *Small bronzes in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Frits Scholten, et al., *Adriaen de Vries*, exh. cat. (Zwolle: Waanders, 1998).

- 7 Rodin himself relied on many practitioners and studio assistants in the production of his works. As Rodin became more commercially successful in the twentieth century, this practice grew. In particular, his marble sculptures have been highly criticized as being the products of such a system. Nevertheless, Rodin evidenced a great deal of interest in displaying the marks of process and the objecthood of his sculptures. See Leo Steinberg, “Rodin [1963],” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 322–403; and for a dissenting view, Daniel Rosenfeld, “Rodin’s Carved Sculpture,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. Albert Elsen (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), pp. 80–102.
- 8 For instance, Antoinette Normand-Romain wrote with regard to Rodin’s reliance on his patineur Jean Limet for the approval and patination of his bronzes after 1900, “Very often, however, Rodin did not see the bronzes: Limet was therefore responsible for assessing the quality of the cast and amending any flaws.” Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, *The Bronzes of Rodin: Catalogue of Works in the Musée Rodin*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2007), 1:31. See further the discussion in Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, “Rodin und seine Mitarbeiter,” in *Auguste Rodin: Eros und Leidenschaft*, ed. Wilfried Seipel (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1996), pp. 127–38.
- 9 Frederick Lawton, *The Life and Work of Auguste Rodin* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), p. 28. A defense of Rodin’s relationship to marble can be found in Athena Tacha Spear, *Rodin Sculpture in the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1967), pp. 67–78. See further Rosenfeld, “Rodin’s Carved Sculpture,” pp. 80–102.
- 10 “véritable enchanteur de la glaise, géant merveilleux, créateur magnanime.” Marie-Reine Aglion, “En parlant de Rodin dans le studio de Judith Cladel,” *Le trésor du siècle*, August 1937.
- 11 Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), p. 29.
- 12 It has been a source of debate about how public this knowledge is. See, for instance,

Elsen, “Rodin’s ‘Perfect Collaborator,’” p. 248; Albert Elsen, “On the Question of Originality: A Letter,” *October* 20 (Spring 1982): pp. 107–9; Rosalind Krauss, “Sincerely Yours: A Reply,” *October* 20 (Spring 1982): p. 116. Lawton made sure to provide a full explanation of this process in his 1907 book because he was aware of many of his readers’ unfamiliarity with it: Lawton, *Life and Work*, pp. 28–30.

- 13 Patricia Sanders, “Notes on Rodin’s Technique,” in *Rodin’s Sculpture: A Critical Study of the Spreckels Collection*, ed. Jacques de Caso and Patricia Sanders (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1977), p. 29.
- 14 It did, however, become cliché in the early twentieth century to recognize that the marbles churned out for collectors (usually American) contained passages in which rough, in-process chisel marks were clearly simulated for effect. Rodin’s declining reputation in the mid-twentieth century was a result of these works, as Leo Steinberg has discussed in “Rodin” [1963], in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 322–403.
- 15 Roger Marx, preface to Muriel Ciolkowska, *Rodin* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1914), vi.
- 16 “man sieht sich unwillkürlich nach den zwei Händen um, aus denen diese Welt erwachsen ist.” Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* [1903] (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1920). Translation from Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Rodin-Book: First Part” [1902–3], in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*, trans. G. Craig Houston (New York: New Directions Books, 1978), p. 89.
- 17 John Berger, “Rodin and Sexual Domination [1967],” in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 179.
- 18 This contradiction has been discussed before, most notably by Leo Steinberg and by Rosalind Krauss. Krauss, in particular, focused on the conflict between “the myth of Rodin as the prodigious form giver” and our awareness of reproducibility in Rodin’s techniques and, as I will discuss below, his multiple uses of casts of the same figure. In her important essay, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” Krauss stressed the ways in which the material circumstances of Rodin’s practice seemed at odds with the originality and authenticity for which Rodin seemed exemplary. She asked, “What are we to make of this little chapter of the *comédie humaine*, in which the artist of the last century most driven to the celebration of his own originality and of the autographic character of his own kneading of matter into formal life, that artist, should have given his own work over to an afterlife of mechanical reproduction?” Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality

of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” *October* 18 (Autumn 1981): p. 52. For Krauss, the contradiction alone was the answer, refuting the simple and mythologizing claims made about Rodin.

- 19 Louis Weinberg, *The Art of Rodin* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1918), p. 31.
- 20 I discuss Rodin’s fraught emulation of Michelangelo in more detail in “1876: Michelangelo and Rodin’s Desires,” chapter 1 of Getsy, *Rodin*.
- 21 “Les intentions du sculpteur sont d’ailleurs visibles dans chaque manifestation de son art. La passion et la douceur qu’il exprime par son modelé, l’attendrissement de caresse qu’il mêle à ses viriles affirmations.” Gustave Geffroy, “Auguste Rodin,” in *Claude Monet. A. Rodin* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1889), p. 73.
- 22 Here, I am leaning on the technical definition of “performative” from Speech Act Theory, most famously articulated in J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 23 For instance, see the discussion of the “technique of originality” with reference to Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse in Richard Shiff, “Representation, Copying, and the Technique of Originality,” *New Literary History* 15, no. 2 (1984): pp. 333–63.
- 24 See discussion in Krauss, “Sincerely Yours,” 110–30; Jean Chatelain, “An Original in Sculpture,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. A. Elsen (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), pp. 275–82.
- 25 See, for instance, Penelope Curtis, “After Rodin: The Problem of the Statue in Twentieth-Century Sculpture,” in *Rodin: The Zola of Sculpture*, ed. Claudine Mitchell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 237–44. A registration of the rapid transformations over the course of the first half of the twentieth century can be seen in Dan Rhodes Johnson, “From ‘Statuary’ to Sculpture—A Long Haul in a Short Time,” *Art Digest* 26, no. 1 (1951): pp. 23–25.
- 26 Malvina Hoffman, 1910 travel diary, entry 8 June 1910. Malvina Hoffman Papers, Getty Research Institute, Series VII, Box 132, Folder 3.
- 27 “Il improvisait à chaque instant une petite figure, exprimant la notation rapide d’une sensation, d’une idée ou d’une forme, et l’insérait dans la porte auprès des autres figures, puis la déplaçait et au besoin la brisait pour en utiliser les fragments à d’autres recherches.” Camille Mauclair, *Rodin: L’Homme et L’Oeuvre* [1905] (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1918), pp. 22–23. Translation by Camille Mauclair, *Auguste Rodin: The Man—His Ideas—His Works*, trans. Clementina Black (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1905), p. 24.
- 28 For a discussion of Rodin’s experimentation with plaster, see Albert Elsen, “When the

Sculptures Were White: Rodin’s Work in Plaster,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. Albert Elsen (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), pp. 127–50. Elsewhere, Elsen has called Rodin’s activities “Serious Play of Sculptural Matchmaking,” an apt metaphor for Rodin’s paratelic process (Albert Elsen, *The Gates of Hell* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 82). Play is a crucial procedure for Rodin and relates to the more widespread experimental possibilities offered by relief sculpture’s intermedial conditions. See Steinberg, “Rodin,” pp. 322–403; Krauss, “Originality,” pp. 47–66; Elsen, “On the Question of Originality: A Letter,” pp. 107–9; Krauss, “Sincerely Yours,” pp. 110–30.

- 29 Steinberg, “Rodin,” p. 377.
- 30 Krauss, *Passages*, p. 17.
- 31 This was also the crux of Rosalind Krauss’s argument about the *Gates* and their denial of narrative that had conventionally been associated in and visualized by friezes. In the *Gates*, “The double appearance is extremely conspicuous, and the very persistence of that doubling cannot be read as accidental. Rather, it seems to spell the breakdown of the principle of spatio-temporal uniqueness that is a prerequisite of logical narration, for doubling tends to destroy the very possibility of a logical narrative sequence.” Ibid.
- 32 Aida Audeh has argued that the bodily replication of the *Three Shades* was informed by Rodin’s engagement with his source text, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, specifically Canto 16 of the *Inferno* and the sodomites referred to as the Three Florentines. Following Audeh’s analysis, the triplication of the figure can be read as a registration of same-sex desire. See Aida Audeh, “Rodin’s Gates of Hell and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: An Iconographic Study” (University of Iowa, 2002), pp. 146–72.
- 33 Rodin himself placed a great deal of emphasis on his own exhibition practices, often staging relations between figures in the same room. See Musée national du Luxembourg, *Rodin en 1900: l’exposition de l’Alma* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2001); Claudine Mitchell, “The Gift to the British Nation: Rodin at the V&A,” in *Rodin: The Zola of Sculpture*, ed. Claudine Mitchell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 183–200.
- 34 “Man sieht Männer und Frauen, Männer und Frauen, immer wieder Männer und Frauen. Und je länger man hinsieht, desto mehr vereinfacht sich auch dieser Inhalt, und man sieht: Dinge.” Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* [1903], p. 108, and translation from Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Rodin-Book: Second Part [1907],” in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*, trans. G. Craig Houston (New York: New Directions Books, 1978), p. 136. My

emphasis. For a helpful analysis of Rilke’s discussions of “things” in relation to Rodin, see Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, pp. 77–98.

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Auguste Rodin

Displacements



Glyptoteket

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