Fall 2019

RODIN: TRUTH, FORM, LIFE Selections from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collections Intro Panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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At the peak of his career, Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was regarded as the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo. Rejecting 19th-century academic traditions that dictated what was "proper" in art, Rodin used marble and bronze to convey the vitality of the human spirit. His vigorous modeling emphasized his personal response to the subject, and he conveyed movement and emotion by inventing new poses and gestures and by creating his own form of artistic expression. Rodin's work led sculpture into the modern era, and his studio practices led other artists there, too.

Born into a modest French family, the young Rodin attended the Petite École, the government school for craft and design, where he learned to sculpt in the traditional way: by drawing from plaster casts made from ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and by modeling in clay while observing a live model. After four years, Rodin applied to the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Paris, but he was rejected three times.

A struggle for recognition dominated Rodin's early career. For nearly a decade, he earned his living as an anonymous member of a sculpture workshop, producing ornamental works for a successful decorative sculptor. Rodin yearned to exhibit his work under his own name and during the 1860s he submitted pieces to the annual juried Paris Salon exhibitions – the most important shows of their day – but received only a series of rejections. Rodin did not receive his first major public commission, *The Gates of Hell*, until 1880, when he was 40 years old. Although *The Gates* project was never cast in full during his lifetime, the commission brought him international fame. In the decades that followed, Rodin was commissioned to create other monuments. Some, like *The Burghers of Calais*, were celebrated, while others, like the *Monument to Balzac*, were controversial. He was also commissioned to create portraits of his famous contemporaries, including *Victor Hugo*.

By 1890, Rodin was working in bronze with a large workshop of assistants, which enabled him to create many sculptures, often in large editions (one piece could be replicated in bronze dozens of times). Rodin was not only prolific but an intrepid self-marketer, sending works to museums, galleries, and collectors all over the world. By 1900, he was Europe's most famous sculptor; at the 1900 Paris World Exposition, he set up an entire pavilion to host a retrospective exhibition of his work. In 1908, he was able to move his studio and gallery to a large eighteenth-century mansion in Paris known as the Hôtel Biron, where he worked and conducted studio business until his death. In 1916, a year before his death, the celebrated sculptor donated the contents of his studio at the Hôtel Biron and of his studio and home in the Paris suburb of Meudon to the people of France in exchange for the government's agreement to establish a museum to assure the artist's continuing legacy. Today, the Hôtel Biron and the structures and land in Meudon are the two sites of the Musée Rodin.

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