



BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Rodin's art bridges the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, his work is that of a traditional nineteenth-century sculptor; the historical subject matter and its translation into monumental narrative sculpture are conventional practices of his time. On the other hand, his work points in a new direction for sculpture. Two characteristics of his work—fragmentation and repetition—are new artistic preoccupations that would interest twentieth-century artists who came after him.

In *The Burghers of Calais* each figure is a composite. Rodin created plaster casts of legs, arms, and torsos throughout his artistic career and used the same casts repeatedly in various sculptures. Sometimes a particular hand or foot would recur in his work over the course of decades. He also combined some of the same casts in a single sculpture.

Here, Rodin portrays six individuals who share some of the same features. For example, Jean d'Aire and Andrieu d'Andres have the same head and face; those of Jacques de Wiessant are a slightly different version. Also, the brothers Jacques and Pierre de Wiessant share the same right hand, while all the figures have similarly large hands and feet.



PIERRE DE WIESSANT



JACQUES DE WIESSANT



JEAN D'AIRE



ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY / DEGAS

Other nineteenth-century artists explored the idea of repeating forms in a single piece to unify a composition and create dynamic rhythms and spatial arrangements. Edgar Degas (1834–1917) composed his figures of dancers, for example, by drawing on a treasury of his own images; sketches, paintings, pastels, and sculptures became the basis for numerous variations on similar themes. Thus, a particular figure could have the head of one model and the torso of another. Degas often would use similar figures, limbs, and gestures in a single work of art.

These combinations would show his dancers as a series of colorful forms in motion rather than as individuals.

In Degas's paintings, as in Rodin's sculptures, the artist builds his own reality rooted in observations of his world and then translated into his own particular vocabulary. Both artists establish their own forms and continuously redefine them so that an arm, a gesture, or a stance takes on a different meaning depending on its context.

Edgar Degas, French
(1834–1917)
Dancers, Pink and Green
Oil on canvas
32 x 29 in. (82.2 x 75.6 cm)
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer
Collection, Bequest of
Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer,
1929
29.100.42



In photography, Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) used stop-action photography to record figures in motion. (Rodin was one of the original subscribers to Muybridge’s *Animal Locomotion*, which first appeared in 1887.) Although the photographers’ objective was scientific—to investigate how figures move in space—the resulting images are characterized by a repetition of movements of the same figure.

Although in *The Burghers of Calais* Rodin depicts six different individuals, the similarities among the figures—their height, large hands and feet, plain garments, and, in the case of Jean d’Aire and Andrieu d’Andres, identical facial features—create a visual

arrangement that unifies their actions. The figures illustrate the range of emotional responses a person might exhibit if faced with the burghers’ predicament. Whereas Muybridge shows the same horse and rider in different stages of motion, Rodin presents six different ways one person might respond to a particular situation.

Like Degas, Muybridge, and Marey, Rodin created a dynamic way of portraying the human figure in motion. By repeating forms within a piece he conveys a sense of movement and unity that challenges the traditional academic model. The repetition of figures and forms both heightens the drama of the piece and creates a complex psychological dimension.

BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY / RODIN'S CRITICS

For many twentieth-century artists, Rodin's genius lies in his means of representation rather than in the stories he tells. Whereas Rodin perceives his style and technique as a way of conveying a message, many twentieth-century artists see the means or the process of creating as an end in itself.

During the 1930s, avant-garde sculptors began focusing on the importance of an artwork's medium and formal elements. Any narrative or subject matter was considered secondary to the primacy of the forms themselves—the shapes in the piece, their arrangement, and use of space. As the formal elements of sculpture became more important to artists than narratives or allegorical subject matter, many rejected Rodin's work as too rhetorical, too bound to particular narratives, and overwhelmed by clichéd themes and emotions.

During the 1950s, however, art historians such as Leo Steinberg championed the sculptor's role as an innovator, singling out the dynamism and energy of his forms.

In May 1954, Curt Valentin organized an exhibition of Rodin's work at his gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. The bronze sculptures and original plasters revealed the experimental nature of his sculpture and marked the beginning of a revival of interest in Rodin's art.

In 1963 the Museum of Modern Art held a major exhibition of the artist's work. Albert Elsen's important monograph *Rodin* was published in conjunction with that exhibition.

The following characteristics of Rodin's sculpture inspired many twentieth-century artists:

- ▶ *Exaggeration of figural proportions*
- ▶ *Numerous focal points in a single piece*
- ▶ *Elimination of a pedestal*
- ▶ *Lack of a pyramidal structure*
- ▶ *Repetition of forms*
- ▶ *Use of fragments*
- ▶ *Evidence of the sculptor's working process*

