

## HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION

In September 1884 the municipal council of Calais decided to commission a statue of Eustache de Saint-Pierre, the oldest and most important of the six burghers of Calais. The decision was controversial because his role in the drama was unclear. Some accounts reported that he had actually committed treason, collaborating with King Edward III, while others lauded him as a great hero.

In January 1885, based on the submission of a small-scale model, the municipal council chose Rodin to create the monument to the burghers of Calais. The clay maquette, or sketch, showed six figures striding forward, with the figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre leading the group.

The contract signed by Rodin and the mayor of Calais required the artist to present a second maquette before completion of the final work; it was to be one-third the size of the final monument. Typically, sculptors of public works submitted a small model for the approval of the committee commissioning the work. The model usually reflected what the finished product would look like.

In this case the committee was pleased with the first version. Rodin proceeded with his work and in August 1885 offered a second model for review. Because Rodin constantly worked and reworked his pieces, the sculpture had taken on, by this point, a very different appearance. After the committee reviewed the second model the members reported:

This is not the way we envisaged our glorious citizens going to the camp of the King of England. Their defeated postures offended our religion. . . the silhouette of the group leaves much to be desired from the point of view of elegance. The artist could give more movement to the ground, which supports his figures and could even break

the monotony and dryness of the silhouette by varying the heights of the six subjects. . . We feel it our duty to insist that M. Rodin modify the attitudes of his figures and the silhouette of his group.

Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 383

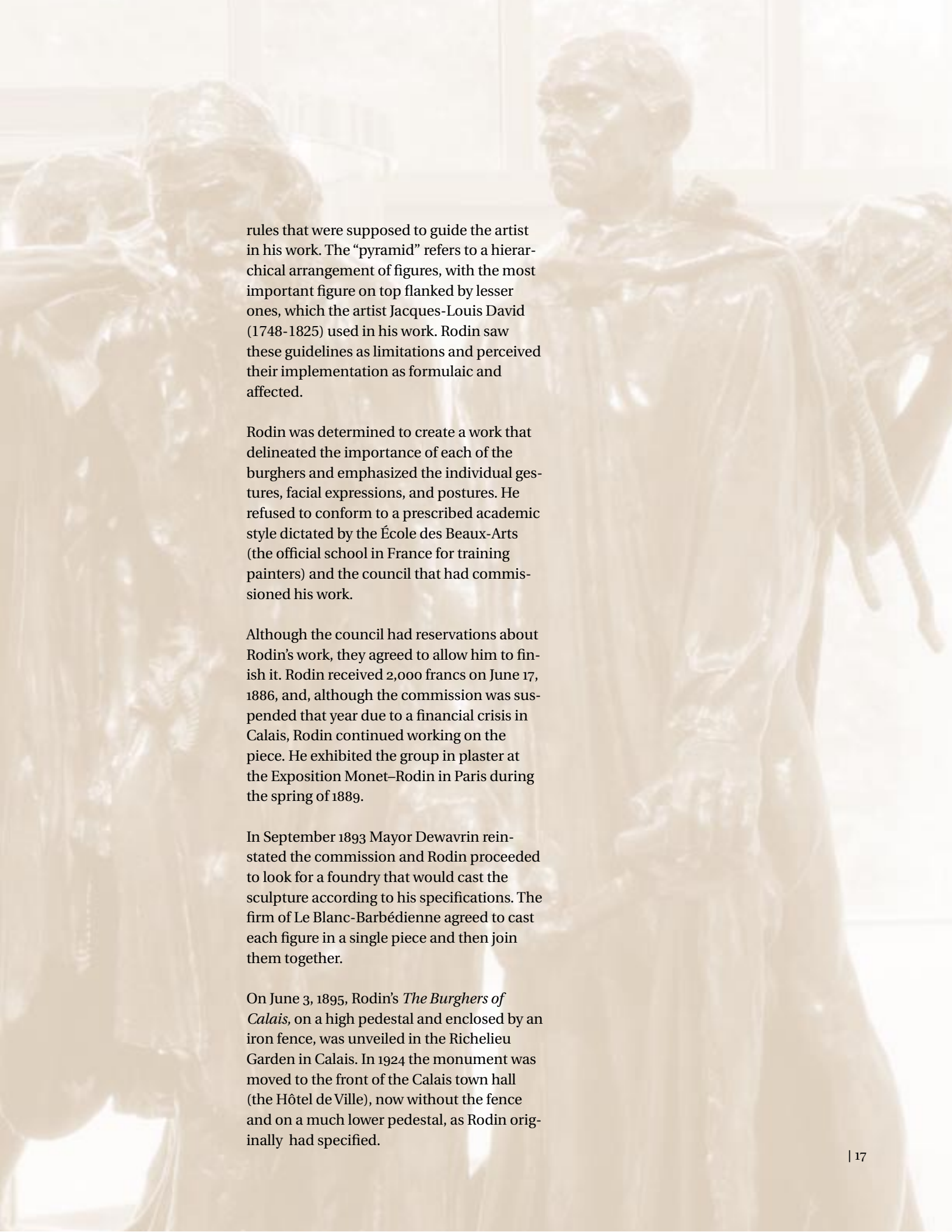
In the first maquette the six figures were elevated on a pedestal, connected by a rope, and arranged striding forward as a group. In the second model Rodin had removed the pedestal and modeled each figure separately. Although they were still on the same level, they now existed as individual figures. From the beginning, the council had not been satisfied with the figural arrangement. Monumental sculpture in the nineteenth century typically assumed a pyramidal structure in order to delineate clearly the most important figure or figures. The council concluded that the separate placement of each figure, all on the same level, rendered the sculpture unacceptable.

Rodin, always quick to respond to negative criticism of his work, wrote a letter to the mayor of the city, Omer Dewavrin:

I read again the criticisms I had heard before, but which would emasculate my work; the heads to form a pyramid (Louis David method) instead of a cube (straight lines) means submitting to the law of the Academic School. I am dead against the principle, which has prevailed since the beginning of this century but is in direct contradiction with previous great ages in art and produces works that are cold, static and conventional. . . I am the antagonist in Paris of that affected academic style. . . you are asking me to follow the people whose conventional art I despise.

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 44

Rodin was addressing criticism that endorsed an academic style intended for all artists. The well-established model for both painting and sculpture provided a series of



rules that were supposed to guide the artist in his work. The “pyramid” refers to a hierarchical arrangement of figures, with the most important figure on top flanked by lesser ones, which the artist Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) used in his work. Rodin saw these guidelines as limitations and perceived their implementation as formulaic and affected.

Rodin was determined to create a work that delineated the importance of each of the burghers and emphasized the individual gestures, facial expressions, and postures. He refused to conform to a prescribed academic style dictated by the *École des Beaux-Arts* (the official school in France for training painters) and the council that had commissioned his work.

Although the council had reservations about Rodin’s work, they agreed to allow him to finish it. Rodin received 2,000 francs on June 17, 1886, and, although the commission was suspended that year due to a financial crisis in Calais, Rodin continued working on the piece. He exhibited the group in plaster at the Exposition Monet–Rodin in Paris during the spring of 1889.

In September 1893 Mayor Dewavrin reinstated the commission and Rodin proceeded to look for a foundry that would cast the sculpture according to his specifications. The firm of Le Blanc-Barbédienne agreed to cast each figure in a single piece and then join them together.

On June 3, 1895, Rodin’s *The Burghers of Calais*, on a high pedestal and enclosed by an iron fence, was unveiled in the Richelieu Garden in Calais. In 1924 the monument was moved to the front of the Calais town hall (the *Hôtel de Ville*), now without the fence and on a much lower pedestal, as Rodin originally had specified.