

RODIN'S INNOVATIONS



Auguste Rodin's sculpture exhibits characteristics that were innovative for his time and that shocked many of his contemporaries, including the town council of Calais.

► **All of the figures stand at the same level.** Although Eustache de Saint-Pierre, the bearded man, was considered the leader of the group, Rodin does not place him in a prominent position in relation to the other burghers; all the men stand at the same level. Rodin chooses not to use the hierarchical arrangement typical of his time, which called for a pyramidal grouping with a prominent central figure. For the viewer, there is no clear distinction as to which figure might be the leader of the group. All the men are literally and figuratively on equal footing.

► **The six burghers face in different directions.** Rodin constructs his sculpture as a collection of figures that seem randomly

grouped together. Because each one is facing in a different direction and gesturing in various ways, each seems to have his own agenda and individual response to the situation.

► **The sculpture has many focal points.** The piece must be viewed from all sides for one to appreciate it in its entirety. Typically, academic-style sculpture presents a single point of reference; the sculpture has a clear front and back.



► **The hands and feet are proportionally large.** The hands and feet of each figure are large and ponderous, out of proportion to the rest of the body. Rodin communicates the severity of the burghers' situation and, specifically, the weight of their decision by literally weighing the men down, binding them to the ground. They are literally and figuratively burdened by their collective decision to sacrifice their lives. Rodin states:

They are still questioning themselves to know if they have the strength to accomplish the supreme sacrifice—their soul pushes them onward, but their feet refuse to walk. They drag themselves along painfully, as much because of the feebleness to which famine has reduced them as because of the terrifying nature of the sacrifice. . .

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69





► **The figures reveal their vulnerabilities.**

The committee was looking for an expression of unqualified bravery, perhaps a proud, lifted chin, an upright posture, or a look of clear determination. They were certainly expecting the facial expressions of the six burghers to correspond with one another and communicate a single purpose. Instead, each of Rodin's burghers exhibits his own response to his decision, and none of these necessarily conforms to a traditional heroic formula. Eustache de Saint-Pierre is stooped, gaunt, and elderly rather than straight-backed, youthful, and muscular. He seems to hesitate instead of marching forward as the group's leader. Andrieu d'Andres buries his head in his hands as though in despair, and Jean de Fiennes, with arms outspread and mouth open, appears to be questioning the decision. Rodin further explains:

I did not hesitate to make them as thin and as weak as possible. If, in order to respect some academic convention or other, I had tried to show bodies that were still agreeable to look at, I would have betrayed my subject. These people, having passed through the privations of a long siege, no longer have anything but skin on their bones. The more frightful my representation of them, the more people should praise me for knowing how to show the truth of history.

I have not shown them grouped in a triumphant apotheosis; such glorification of their heroism would not have corresponded to anything real.

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69

► **The burghers are dressed in plain garments rather than in fine, expensive clothing that would identify them as leading citizens of their town.** All the men wear simple, nondescript garments, which look like a kind of undergarment rather than the finery that would have identified them as the leading citizens of Calais. Although Froissart's text explains that King Edward III ordered the burghers to dress in plain garments, the council conveyed to Rodin that if he had shown them at an earlier moment in the narrative, they could have been portrayed in more stately, respectable clothing. Rodin, however, chooses to show the burghers when they are leaving the city and look the most vulnerable. He wants them to appear as ordinary human beings en route to a terrible fate.

► **Their facial expressions project complex emotions.** The members of the council were looking for an unequivocal message, that is, a clear illustration of a historical event or an allegory. They expected the figures to communicate a single, unambiguous message. In *The Burghers of Calais* each figure's expression is complex and multifaceted. About this Rodin says:

... I have ... threaded them one behind the other, because in the indecision of the last inner combat, which ensues, between their devotion to their cause and their fear of dying, each of them is isolated in front of his conscience. They are still questioning themselves to know if they have the strength to accomplish the supreme sacrifice. ...

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69

Rodin is describing how each of the burghers has an intensely personal experience even though he is part of a larger group. *The Burghers of Calais* reveals, through gesture and expression, the psychological complexity of each man's decision.

► **Rodin did not want the sculpture placed on a pedestal.** He wanted the figures to be on the same level as those who viewed the sculpture. He stated:

I did not want a pedestal for these figures. I wanted them to be placed on, even affixed to, the paving stones of the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville in Calais so that it looked as if they were leaving in order to go to the enemy camp. In this way they would have been, as it were, mixed with the daily life of the town: passersby would have elbowed them, and they would have felt through this contact the emotion of the living past in their midst; they would have said to themselves: "Our ancestors are our neighbors and our models, and the day when it will be granted to us to imitate their example, we would show that we have not degenerated from it." ... But the commissioning body understood nothing of the desires I expressed. They thought I was mad. ... Statues without a pedestal! Where had that ever been seen before? There must be a pedestal; there was no way of getting around it.

Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 385