

# THE HAND OF RODIN

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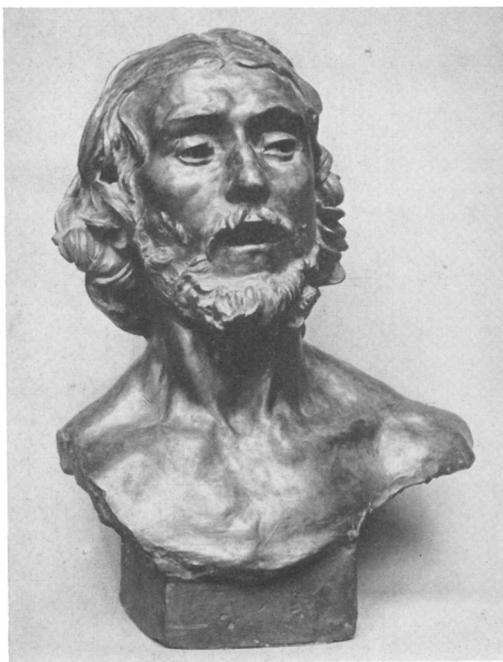
Sixty-four years ago the Museum placed on exhibition Rodin's bronze sculpture, the head of Saint John the Baptist. This was the first work by the French sculptor given to the Museum and one of the first of his works to be exhibited in this country. At that time (1893) Rodin was still a very controversial figure and a sort of storm center of the art world; in some circles he was considered to be an outrageous rebel and modernist. Although he was then well known his greatest fame was still to be won. His French critics and the conservative sculptors of the Paris school were still actively hostile to the man and all his works. How things have changed since that far-off day!

Since then Rodin has been accepted as an indisputably great master of sculpture; during the closing years of his career (1900-1917) he was overwhelmed with honors and adulation. He was said to be the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo. But shortly after his death, the avant-garde of the 1920's and 30's saw him as an old-fashioned sentimentalist, a figure of fun—poor old man. Yet recently the tide has turned again, and in the perspective of time serious historians of modern art see him as “the father of modern sculpture.”

However, while sculptors and critics have occupied themselves with these aesthetic tergiversations and countermarches, the general public has taken Rodin to their hearts. They

made up their minds about him early in this century and they have remained his faithful admirers ever since.

At this distance in time it is hard to realize the terrific impact of Rodin's sculpture on the art world of his day. His vigorous figures, a curious blend of carnality and discarnate dreams, which were produced in such tumultuous profusion in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, electrified the world. Their effect upon the tame French sculpture of the time was devastating. His refreshingly bold statements in marble and bronze exploded in the stale artificial atmosphere of the official French art world like a pagan spring gale bursting into a room long closed. The shock upset all the carefully arranged bric-a-brac of the Salon and stirred up the tenants of the house to action against this brutal intruder.



*Head of Saint John the Baptist, by Rodin. Gift of Samuel P. Avery, 1893. Height, 21 inches*

The sculptors and art critics of Paris unleashed against him the most violent attacks. For a time it seemed as though Rodin was much better understood and more widely appreciated abroad than he was at home. During his lifetime the general attitude toward the sculptor himself and his work was perforce colored by this running battle carried on by his friends and enemies. Later his models, his mistresses, his misfortunes; the senseless mischievousness of notoriety-seeking society ladies; the stupidities of timid monument committees; the scandals and alarms and snarls



*The Thinker, one of the figures for Rodin's uncompleted project the Gate of Hell, designed about 1889. Bronze; height, 27 inches. The Museum also has an example in plaster. Gift of Thomas Fortune Ryan, 1910*



*Madame X, a portrait by Rodin of Anne Élisabeth Brancovan, Countess of Noailles. This marble sculpture, the original example, was made about 1907. Height, 19½ inches. Gift of Thomas Fortune Ryan, 1910*

of government red tape; all furnished an endless flow of gossip about him.

Now it is possible to look at the sculpture of Rodin objectively—for itself alone—without distracting references to the personal life of the sculptor. His work, taken as a whole, stands as a monument to his dedicated concentration on representing living forms in such a way that they suggest emotions and ideas. His sculptures, in spite of the literary titles which they may have been given, are essentially studies in plastic form, quite unlike the literary or story-telling sculpture of his contemporaries.

For Rodin—as for many sculptors—the most

beautiful and most significant form was the human body in motion. In the representation of the subtly flowing geometry of the living, moving man or woman Rodin found what was for him the whole meaning of sculpture. His single-minded absorption in this complex problem eventually transformed him from a merely skillful modeler into a powerful artist able to say important things about life and humanity. As the naturalistic impressionism of his style developed he was able to translate the commonplace realities of plain anatomical fact into the expressive language of sculpture. His vibrant figures capture the flowing motion of living

forms. They seem to strike upon the eye as the deep voices of great bronze bells pulse and resound upon the ear, shaking the very atmosphere with their vitality. This is the effect of the mysterious power of Rodin's hand that endowed his sculpture with qualities of an enduring interest beyond the now dated fads and fancies of the art of his time.

Another reason for Rodin's continuing popularity is that he saw in ordinary men and women the beauty, the pathos, and the meaning of the natural gestures of the human creature. He did not use self-conscious professional models who were trained to assume automatically the stock postures and expressions of Greco-Roman statuary. His creatures, being ordinary people, speak simply of basic human feelings which are instinctively recognized and accepted by everyone. Although Rodin's sculpture is no longer considered very sensational the impact of his unorthodox visions upon the straight-laced Victorians and Edwardians of his own time may be imagined. To such an audience the most shocking revelation of his work lies in the very fact that his sculpture is not a matter of antiseptic neo-classic gods and goddesses but men and women wracked by powerful human feelings—pain, sorrow, love, yearning, tenderness, and despair. One feels that perhaps the naked emotions represented were more shocking in 1890 than the nude figures in which these emotions were embodied.

One of the most significant clues to Rodin's attitude toward his own work is his remark that his sculpture should be seen through eyes brimming with the tears of emotion.

His sculpture *is* emotional, but even at their most melodramatic Rodin's ideas are never expressed in the flaccid, timeworn sculptural clichés of the academic manner of his time. In the main he seems to have avoided most of the classic faults of French nineteenth-century sculpture by his boldly designed realization of living forms. In some ways Rodin's sculpture is curiously un-French; in it he speaks of the human race first and of French nationality afterwards. This is perhaps a clue to the rapid expansion of his fame throughout Europe and America and to the sustained public interest in his work.

Rodin's sculpture has made an apparently indelible impression upon the popular imagination (one needs only to name *The Thinker*), an impression which now appears to be as enduring as the stone or bronze in which his sculpture is preserved. To produce works of art which become familiar and widely accepted symbols—images which are a living part of the mental furniture of generations of men—this is the ultimate reward, the final triumph for an artist.

Many sculptors have copied the style and work of Michelangelo, and in some of Rodin's work his indebtedness to the Italian master is clearly evident. Rodin's statue of Adam not only shows the relation between the work of these two sculptors but it also inevitably demonstrates at the same time the wide divergence between their feeling about sculpture and their ways of seeing. Both Rodin and Michelangelo had the divine gift—an ability to suffuse their works with the mysterious appearance of life—but their ways of arriving at this were quite different. Michelangelo found his creatures encased in hard blocks of stone, from which he cut them free with mallet and chisel—his perception was essentially glyptic; but Rodin built up and modeled his figures in soft clay—his imagination, his feeling for sculpture was essentially plastic.

The few etchings that Rodin made show his hand to be that of a sculptor. He seemed to attack the metal plate not as a surface upon which to draw but rather as a plastic medium in which to carve an intaglio. His drawings, which fell from his hands by the hundreds like autumn leaves, are almost all rapid, shorthand sketches recording with lightning speed his never-ending search for form, his ceaseless delight in the momentary glimpse of the human figure in motion.

For many years Rodin's marble *The Hand of God* has been studied and admired by the visitors to our galleries. This curious work seems to have a strange attractive power upon the imagination of those who view it as a symbolic religious image, the great hand of God gently molding man and woman from the formless dust of the earth and tenderly sheltering them. This work suggests that God himself is the supreme sculptor creating his own image—the final grand ab-

straction. It also suggests an idea which some sculptors entertain of the godlike power in their sensitive hands by means of which they try to create forms that seem, but only seem, to live.

It has been said that Rodin used his own hand as a model for this work—doubtless he used it for all his many studies of hands. Rodin shows us the human hand for what it is—a powerful and fateful symbol—the most sensitive and beautiful machine—an abstract form capable of expressing the moods of the god and the beast in man.

When Rodin had achieved wide fame it was believed that his methods of working and his ideas about sculpture and its relation to nature would have a great and enduring effect upon the art. Many sculptors did adopt his mannerisms and many students flocked to his atelier to study with the master, but the real influence of Rodin was not, in the long run, that of a teacher. Historically Rodin stands alone; he was not the founder of a school of imitators. He was something much more important. He took sculpture away from the literal and literary carvers and modelers of the late nineteenth century and restored its ancient and normal function—the making of images that celebrate the living thoughts and bodies of men. And in doing this he broke the dead plaster molds of the conventions of his time and opened up the way to the revolution which has occurred in sculpture in the past forty years. However, though Rodin is now credited as the father of modern sculpture he never thought of himself in this way—in fact he spoke harshly of the modern sculpture of his time as “cubist filth.” He thought of himself as one who tried to give back to sculp-

ture its ancient beauty, not as one who pointed the way to traditionless experimentation. But his work made it possible for men of another generation to be absolutely free to experiment with sculpture as a study of related volumes and voids existing and moving in space, sculpture unhampered by traditional subjects, tools, methods, or materials. By his efforts sculpture was stripped down to basic fundamentals—a drastic process, a painful process.

It is wonderful to think of Rodin—a poor man of peasant stock who merely by manipulating a handful of mud was able to raise himself from ignorance and oblivion to world fame and to realize that while he was doing this he also offered the world a thousand new ways of thinking about the art of sculpture. This in brief is Rodin’s biography.

And because of this he rises up in the history of Western sculpture to dominate ordinary men in the same way that his Balzac monument overshadows so many little monuments of the time. Beside most of the other sculptors of the end of the nineteenth century Rodin stands apart, a pow-

erful and individualistic giant who invented an intensely personal style with which he effected a reinvigoration of the whole art of sculpture. Historically a case can be made out to show Rodin to be a terminal figure—the last great romantic master; but now he appears as a precursor in whose works lie the seeds of modern sculpture. Perhaps this very ambivalence speaks most clearly of the real measure of Rodin’s greatness, for in his work the critic, the historian, and the modern sculptor can find whatever they look for—a unique individual—an end—or a beginning.



*Detail of The Hand of God, by Rodin. Marble. Gift of Edward D. Adams, 1908*