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**IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE WORK OF
RODIN.**

BY

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Frankly sexual; blatantly erotic; expressive; revealing; distraught; these are just some of the words that can be used to describe the images of women we find in the work of Auguste Rodin (1840-1914). To analyse and examine this artist's portrayal of women, particularly from the point of view of sexuality and gender is especially edifying in that it provides the reader with an insight into how Rodin's work could have been interpreted in his own lifetime and, also, how they can be reinterpreted today, in the light of the historical, social and cultural advancements made this century.

The art of the late nineteenth century exerted a distinct bias towards the representation of the female nude. The conventions of this period held this image as a symbol of male dominance in art and society. When applied to Rodin's depictions of women, this matrix along with the contemporary and influential psychological theories of Freud provide us with new and interesting perspectives on his portrayal of the female nude and sexuality.

Developments made in the twentieth century provide us with ample reason and resource for re-examination of Rodin's use of the female nude in his work . These include the fact that the representation of sexuality and eroticism has evolved in Western art since the turn of the century and in light of the changing role of women in society; the continued and further applications of Freud's theories to the female nude, sexuality and psyche and the questioning of patriarchal conventions towards the female nude posed by Feminist art and artists today.

In order to query the implications and significance of these developments it is first necessary to place Rodin as a European artist within his historical context and to survey the prevalent art movements of his time.

A hundred years ago in Paris, the prestigious Art Salons were the undisputed centre of the visual arts. It was here that contemporary art was entered and, if successful, exhibited. These salons were overrun with ephemeral artworks of loving couples, heroic men and vulnerable women. Those figures were constructed according to prescribed systems of measurement. These 'classical' figures were acceptable, as they posed no insult to the predominant Christian standards of society at this time.

A number of separate art movements existed at this time, the most prominent of which was Neo-classicism. This was based on the desire to recreate the heroic spirit of the art from Ancient Greece and Rome. The main artistic inspiration for this type of work stemmed from archaeological discoveries and explorations, including those at Pompeii and Herculaneum, made during the nineteenth century.

Romanticism, although of more importance in the early nineteenth century, still echoed in European art at the turn of the last century. This was based on the belief in the value of individual expression in art and an insistence on the primacy of the imagination in artistic expression.

Realism was also a prominent art movement in Rodin's day. Artists working in the style wished to get away from the historical, mythological and religious subjects of European art and was essentially based on a realistic, 'down-to-earth' depiction of the human figure, including family and working settings.

Sculpture as a medium of artistic expression was considered second to painting at this time, this placed those working in the chosen medium in various difficulties, including problems concerning the cost of materials and studio space. In order to break with the predominant academic style of his day, Rodin looked back to traditional sculptural influences, particularly Michaelangelo and Donatello, in his search for the essential truth in the representation of the human body. In his own words : "I am a bridge between the past and the present".⁴ As a artist, Rodin did not affiliate with any particular art movement but was evidently inspired by and shared some of the ideals that emanated from contemporary art.

The conservatism of the predominant academic style is what defined Rodin's work as essentially new and audacious for his time and with him we recognise the link with the past. Rodin revitalised sculpture as an expressive means of artistic creation, whilst remaining within the conventions of his day and most importantly, he revived sculpture when it was at its lowest ebb in art history.

PART 1

The female nude, in all its glory of shape and form, has an unchallenged status as an integral component of Western art. Through the ages we have witnessed it as a recurring commodity utilized by artists in every conceivable form and context; from the idealised Venuses, Goddesses and nymphs of Ancient Greece and Rome through to the obscure and macabre representations of women portrayed by artists in medieval times. According to Clark however, at the turn of the last century "the Greek ideal of physical beauty had suffered a century of singular corruption. A convincing assertion of complimentary truth began."²

The nude in art exists as a perfect example of the transformation of matter into form, and in it we recognise the transgression from the naked to the nude and the actual to the ideal. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the female nude had become the most prevalent form in European figurative art. Previous to this it was mainly the unclothed male that dominated in the life classes of European Academies and Studios. Indeed in France the Academie Royale de Peinture et du Sculpture, naked female models were forbidden throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their use in the privately run studio was very expensive and, therefore, prohibiting.³

An important feature of a successful representation of the female nude is an element of controll of the potential excessiveness of sex and sexuality. This can place the artist in a rather difficult situation, as the actual representation can be a transmutation of the sexual drive into artistic creation. Rodin was an exemplar of this rather than an exception and his highly

charged sex life is often described as the driving force behind his work. Many monographs on Rodin, while discussing his life and the aura of controversy which surrounded it, regarding his reputation as a seducer and a lecher, attribute his highly sexualised depictions of the female nude to his avid involvement with women.⁴

Each particular era forms its own ideals and criteria of judgement for the nature of appearance of the female nude and body. The ideal female figure from the time of the nineteenth-hundreds was very different to that of today. The archetypal woman then had a full and well built figure, comprising of large hips and bust and a trim waist (corsetry was still in mode.). The face and head were emphasised by coiffured hair and exuberent hats. The limbs and feet were generally subsidual elements of the body (Ill. 1). The women we see immortalised in the drawings and sculptures of Rodin are, in many ways, not far from this socially precieved ideal and are representative of the typical female figure of their time.

It is not suprising seeing that instead of choosing from an abundance of professionally trained models in Paris , Rodin preferred to select his models from the circus world and the streets. He considered these women - acrobats, dancers, maids, etc. - to be far more versitile in his study of the human form.

An underlying but important principle that pertains to art that features the female nude is that it is aimed at a preminently male audience. From this, we can deduce that if the viewer was generally accepted to be male then the corresponding nude was, appropriately, female. This was an important factor in the heightened concentration on the



Fig. 1

representation of the female body and image in art, particularly from the middle of the nineteenth century.

As an artist, Rodin, did not explore the image of male sexuality to any comparable level to his investigation and representation of female sexuality. Even though the artworks we initially associate with Rodin are male figures, for example : 'The Thinker' (1880), 'Age of Bronze' (1876) and ' St. John the Baptist' (1876); his treatment of the male figure was in an historical and allegorical context, rather than an obvious exploration of the male sexuality and the powers of its representation.

Aside from the structural contrasts between the physical forms of the two sexes, it was already predetermined for Rodin, who this type of art was for and who it would be viewed by. The male engendered image of the female body is traditionally a representation of woman as a vulnerable and passive object to be exploited in art, "cut to the patterns of male desires " ⁵

On close examination of Rodin's work we find this narrative to be true. He utilised woman and the female image not only for her physical and sculptural form, but in a number of other ways; for her powerful status as an essential image in art ; for her sexuality as an element of eroticism; and, in line with the Neo-classical art of his day, the female figures in his work were given historical and allegorical contexts, for example, 'Orepheus and Eurydice' (1893).

Accompanying the history of portrayal of women in art, there exists a strong association and inquisitiveness as to the identity of the model as somebody's lover, wife or mother. As Nochlin points out: " the female nude of tradition can hardly call

her sexuality her own "6 Rodin's artistic work cultivated a strong public curiosity as to the identities of his models which was only enhanced by his growing reputation as a seducer and a womaniser. His passing fancies varied from housemaids to models; performers to society women :

" As a man and a lover, he endeavoured to possess, to the frequent detriment of those taken, a truth about women through that which they unwittingly unfolded from their bodies " 67

The more famous women who became involved with Rodin include the sculptress Camille Claudel and the English painter Gwen John. However, Rose Beuret, whom Rodin met in 1864, was to become his lifelong companion (mainly because of her own determination) and eventually became his wife in 1917.

From these preceeding points we can judge that in the representation of women and the female nude in art , she exists primarily as an object and has little or no primacy over her bodily or emotional represrenation. This point is one which will be further discussed in Part 2 of this discussion.

The female nude is caught up in a perpetual cycle of judgement and categorisation. The female nudes from Rodin's work provides us with a wealth of images embracing many different aspects and classifications of women and femininity. Their physical content lends itself to many and varied interpretations of the work . The way in which Rodin categorized his depictions of women is discussed here with particular emphasis on his sculptural work . When viewed within the perameters of turn of the century art , Rodins depictions of women, on one hand merge with the traditions and ideals of form

and content that prevailed at the time, while also coming across as deviant and diverse.

From Rodin's use of the female form in his work , we can plot the progression of woman from a virginal girl to an old woman. In the work 'Torso of a young girl' (Ill. 2), Rodin has emphasised the shape of this adolescent body by removing its limbs and head. This exclusion was one Rodin was fond of as a way of centering the viewer's attention on what he felt were the most important elements of the figure. It was also a popular feature of Neo-classical art at the time.

Although the figure ' Iris - Messenger of the Gods ' has managed to retain one of her limbs, Rodin has removed her head. I say removed, because as seen in (Ill. 4) , an original head of Iris actually existed. The absence of the head and left arm results in one's attention being drawn along the muscular limbs of the torso, centering on the figure's breasts and genitals. Rodin does not rely on her facial expression to render her emotive. Furthermore, the piece is not constrained to a stone base or plinth, like most contemporary figurative art. This gives the figure more independence; it now faces us as simply fleshy and sensual.

Iris, this stretched and taut female nude, seems to writhe with overpowering emotions, be they joyous or otherwise painful. Earlier works, such as, 'Crouching Woman' (Ill. 5) also show Rodin's interest in this type of pose, where a woman's thigh is pressed firmly against her body, "resulting in a sculpturally daring revelation of the subjects crotch".⁸ Rodin also seems to have exaggerated the lips of the females pudenda, they appear here more swollen and voluptuous than normal. This display of

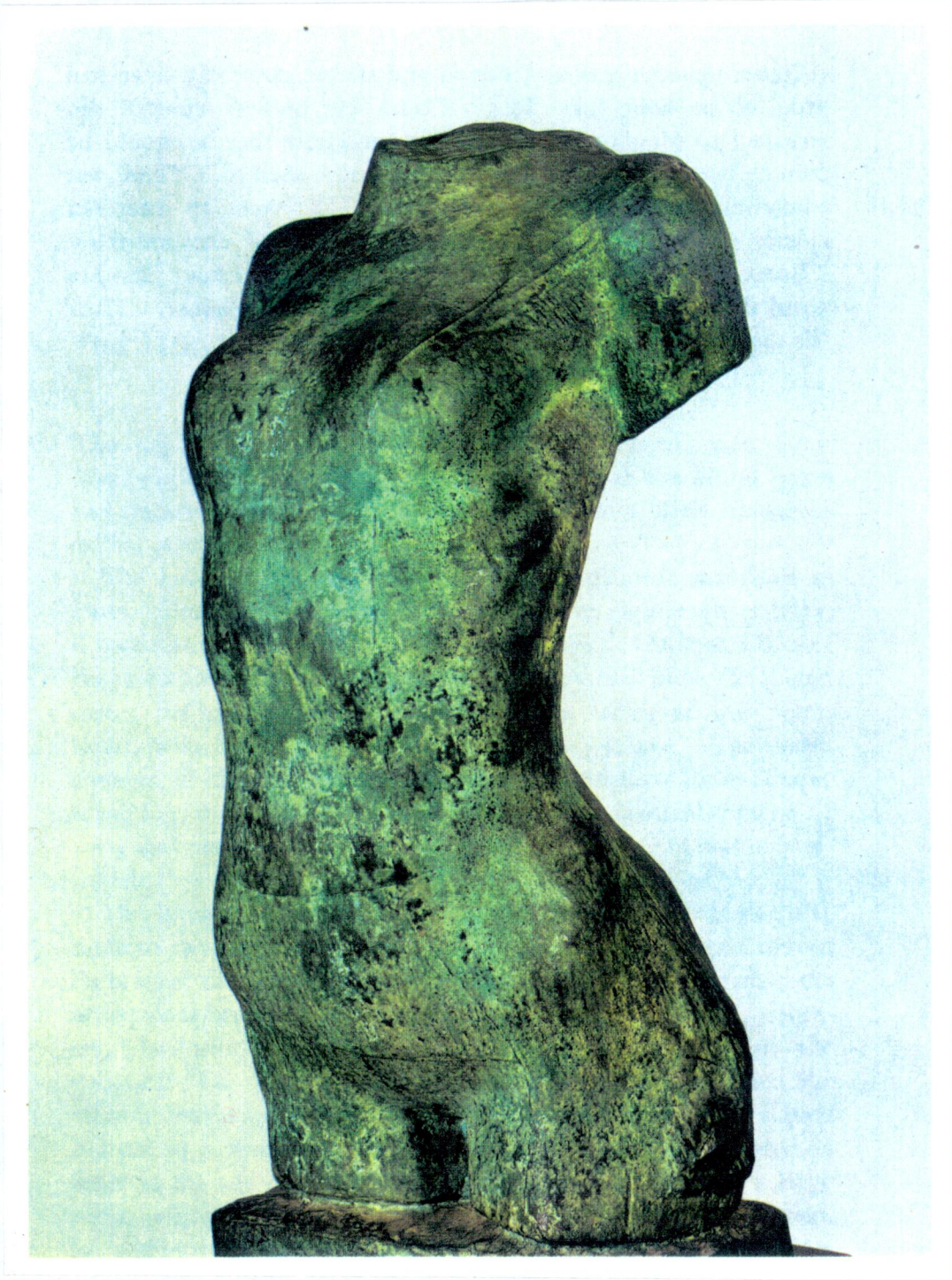


Fig. 2



100



Fig, 3





Fig. 4





Fig. 5

the females private parts was quite audacious for its time. Even though eroticism was a popular and well exploited in nineteenth century European art, this leitmotiv is one which is more freely recognised and discussed in the art of primitive and non-European cultures than in our own. In Rodin's time (and still to an extent today) it is sequestered to an almost hidden, esoteric category of art, consisting mainly of pornography - which by tradition was created by men ,for men and with few exceptions featured women as the main object of desire.

In the work 'Ecclesiastes'(Ill. 6), we also find a female figure revealing her sexual centre to us. What seperates this piece from Rodin's main work is it's symbolic composition, of a nude placed on a sculpted book. Her erotic pose is quite daring, but her eyes are directed towards the book which she lays upon. The attached title imbues fresh meaning to the work , placing it in a religious context. (Ecclesiastes is one of the books of the old Testament, traditionally ascribed to Solomon). This symbolist adherent was probably, like many of his other titles, an afterthought; indeed on occasions it was left up to his friends to choose an appropriate title for a piece.

The opposite pole to these lithe young figures sculpted by Rodin has to be that which is entitled 'She who once was the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife'(Ill. 7 a & b). Again this is unique in its chosen subject matter and as a theme in contemporary art. It stood out as something new and accomplished in contemporary figurative sculpture and it contrasts sharply with the angels and cupids of the Neo-classical idiom. It also posed a new aesthetic challenge for artists , enhancing the fact that the beauty of a work does not depend on the beauty of its subject.



Fig. 6



Fig 6(b)



Fig. 7



This is essentially an honest representation of the body and physique of an elderly woman - an unused subject by nineteenth century standards and the only one portrayed by Rodin himself. This provides us with evidence that Rodin's appreciation of the female nude was not merely based on young agile models. In his own words :

" In true youth , that of virginal puberty, the body, full of brand new vigour, awakens in its swelte pride and seems both to fear and to summon love. This moment hardly lasts more than a few months .Without even speaking about the deformations caused by child-bearing, the fatigue caused by desire and the fever caused by passion rapidly slaken the tissues and relax the lines. The girl becomes a woman. This is another type of beauty, still admirable but less pure. " 9

This female nude does not aim to attract and arouse but more importantly, to act as a reminder of times passing effect on the human body and spirit. Rodin did not portray the male nude in any similar guise but used only the representation of woman to carry the weight of this stark reminder.

Rodin's depiction of lovers deviated from the mainstream tradition, displaying active loving couples each enveloping the other in their desire to become one. They also differ fundamentally by showing equal consumation and activity of both male and female figures while also questioning conventional composition. It was quite unusual at this time to find women represented as being of equal strength and power in sculpted couple, as we see in 'The Eternal Idol' (Ill. 8). Traditional images at this time portrayed women as a passive member of a union, for example, in scenes of rape or abduction.



Fig. 8



Fig, 9

However in Rodin's work we do also find female nudes who have fallen prey to a male figure. The works 'Avarice and Lust' (Ill. 9 a & b) and 'Psyche and Springtime' (Ill. 10 a & b) are examples of this and the latter holds strong collaborative tension between the two figures, in which the male figure stares at the viewer. It is as if one has stumbled upon him as he is about to commit his crime.

Images of lesbianism are also seen manifest as a sexual theme in Rodin's work, the use of which has generally been attributed to studio experimentation in which he would combine fragments of cast figures into new and interesting groupings. The work entitled 'Two women embracing' (Ill. 11) appears to be a product of this. However, its blatant eroticism and the way in which the artist has placed the two women in this configuration would make one doubt this sincerely. Rodin has cunningly displayed the female figure on top with only one arm in view. The other arm seems to be lost between the parted legs of her partner. As we shall see in Part 2, lesbian imagery was quite popular in the nineteenth century.

For many hundreds of years in Western civilisation men have existed as the dominant sex in society. Through the ages, men have played the leading roles in the fields of politics, trade, industry and cultural affairs and as a corollary to this, men have emerged as the predominant and influential artists in society. Men also controlled the pivotal patronage system; which generally came from the upper and middle classes and which artists in Rodin's day heavily depended upon. Enormous gender inequalities existed in society and the role played by women was most definitely subservient to that of their male counterparts.

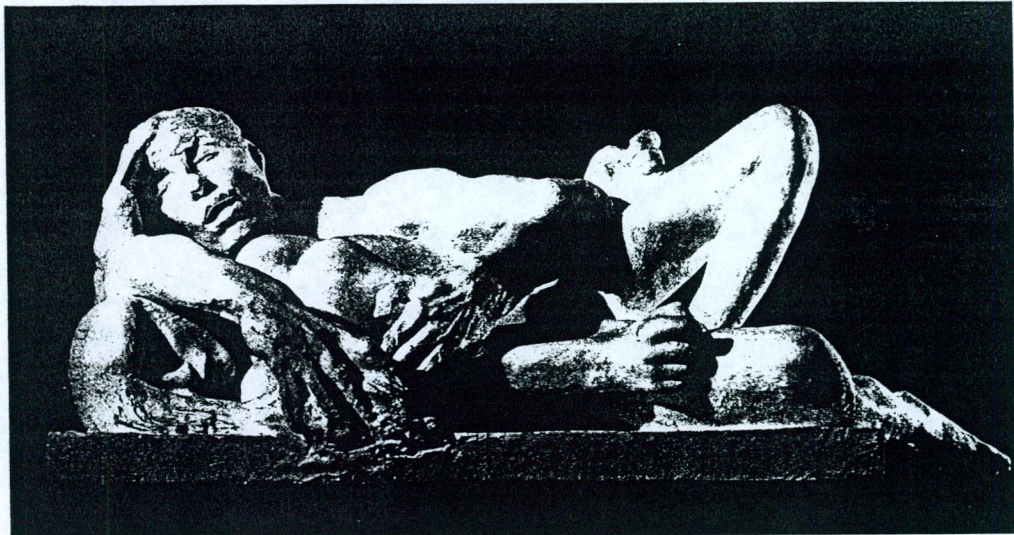
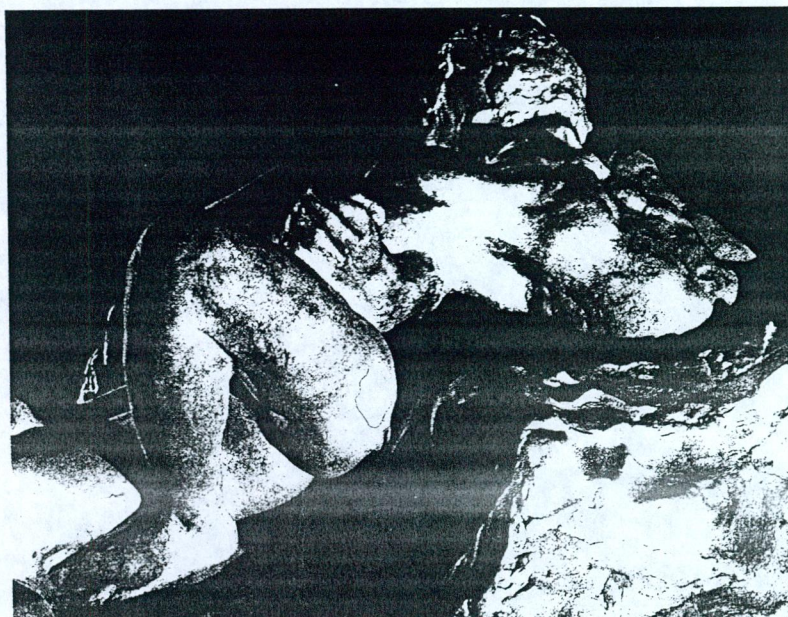


Fig 10.



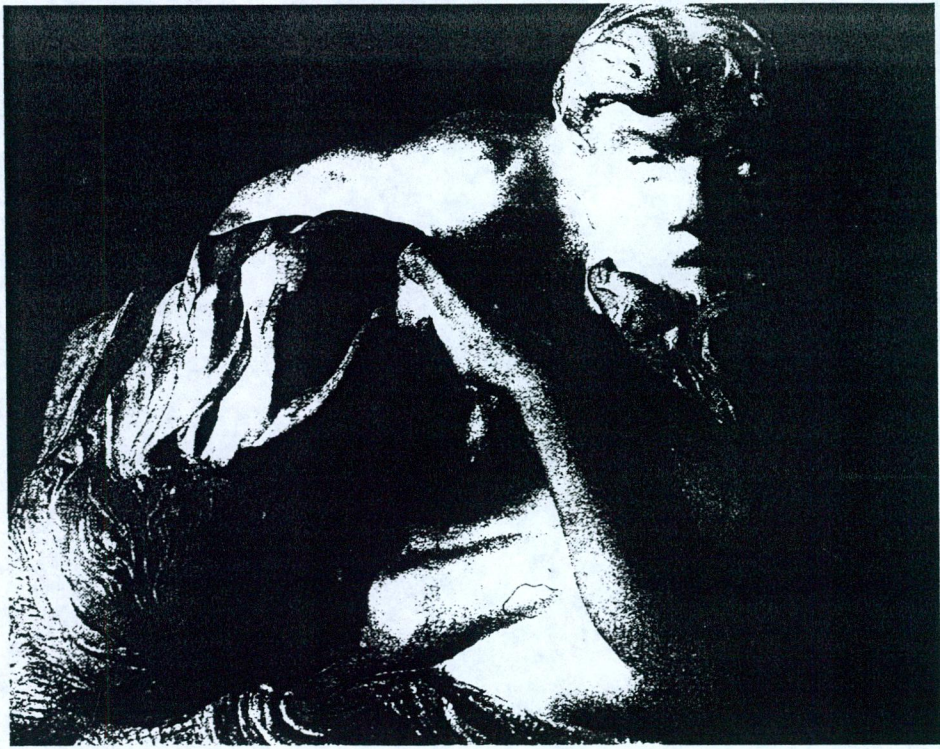
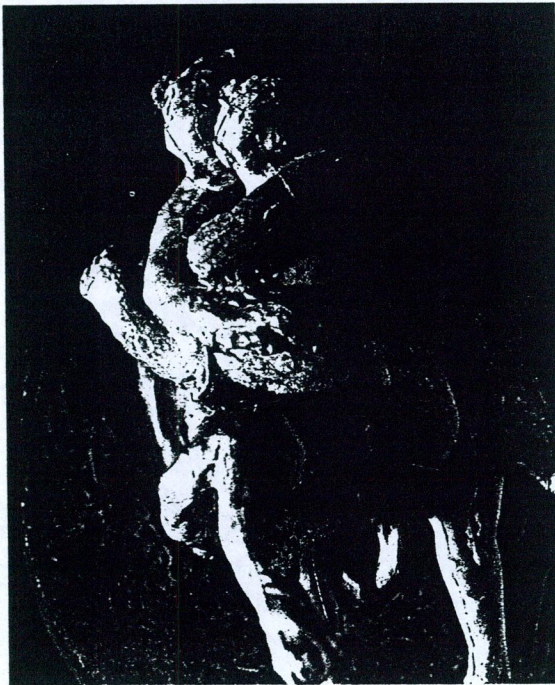
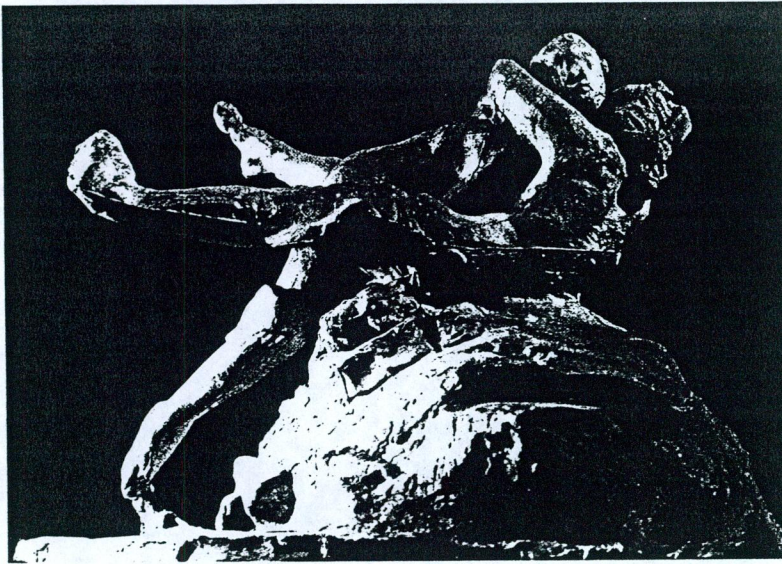


Fig. 11





Fig, 12



By the end of the nineteenth century the women's suffrage movement had become an important issue and struggle in Europe. In general, the Suffragist Movement fought for the right of women by law to vote in national and local elections. Although the issue was more to the fore in Britain and the United States of America, it was also beginning to be addressed in France at this time.¹⁰ One method used by the movement was to oppose the archetype of femininity held in such great esteem in the convention of the female nude in High Art. There was strong objection to the desiring stare evident in the eyes of the desiring male viewer of the female nude of this tradition. Added to this was the great disparity between the female figures filtered through the male eyes of the Art Salon and the ordinary woman on the street.

The very existence and growth in strength of this movement, which set about questioning and improving the positions of women in society, was also responsible for a growing fear among men that women were escaping from within the patriarchal power reign. This resulted in a male societal need to control women.

This struggle is evident in 'I am beautiful'(Ill. 12). When you compare the undertone of this piece with that of any other contemporary work in which the woman is viewed as a reluctant sexual object, there to be exploited; we find their resolutions to be poles apart. The female featured here struggles from her impassioned suitor and refuses to yield to his embrace. The fear and frustration this causes the male is read in his furrowed brow. The woman defies his desire for physical union as he desperately grapples for her, to try to bring her under his control. This is



Fig. 13



Fig, 14

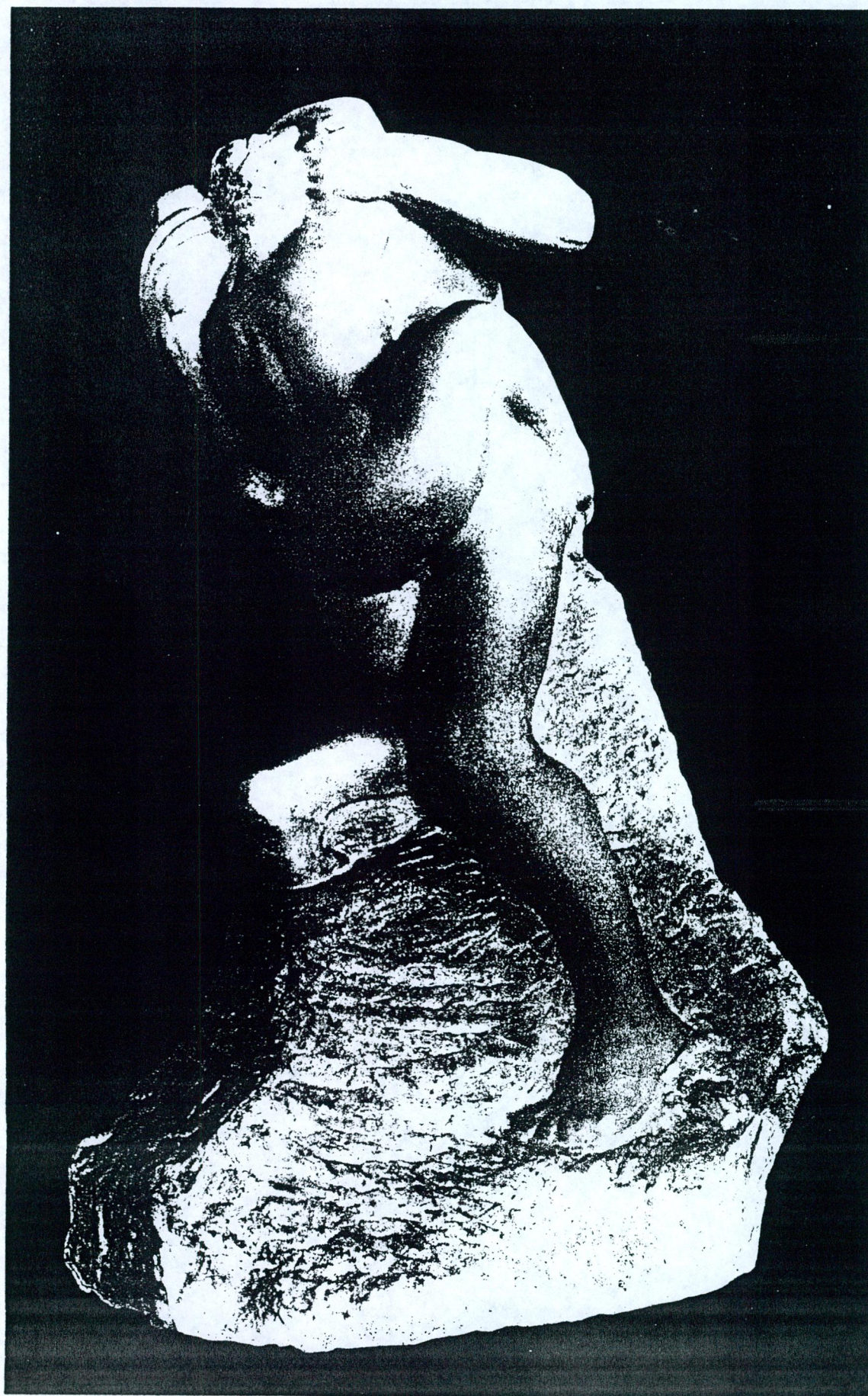
further emphasised by the physical presence of the male as larger than that of the small but spirited female.

In light of the bourgeois fear of women, the work entitled ' L'Emprise '(Ill. 13) provides us with an interesting interpretation. Here we see an augmentive view of woman in her much feared role, as she clings to her prey - man. This piece could be seen as a culmination of the social and cultural fear in man at the time , of the all-devouring woman. The man's strong and bulky hands attempt to push this female figure away from him, but she has already wrapped herself around his torso. Attached to the female's rump we see a strangely erotic protrusion which cannot but be described as phallogentric (and which also pertains to the psychological theory of penis-envy.).

In some ways Rodin's own personal struggle in the conventional art world of Paris can be seen to be corollary to the fight of the Suffragist movement and the women working in the realm of the arts at the time. We even have evidence of his acknowledgement of these developments made by women :

" And Dance, which has always been the prerogative of eroticism in our society, is today finally being considered a worthy adjunct to the arts, of which it is the distillation. In this, as in other expressions of the modern spirit, women are responsible for the renewal. " "

The psychological studies of Freud gave the world new theories on human sexuality and the division of the sexes. Freud and his contemporaries succeeded in radically changing the prevalent views on human behaviour this century. A Freudian theory of particular interest to us at this point in the discussion is that of the Oedipal complex (1897) in which he researched in great depth human homosexuality and with regard to the female



Fig, 15

sex. Central to this theory is the importance of conditioning and development in the early childhood years, which Freud saw as a major determinant in the individuals eventual sexual development. In light of this he theorised that the failure of a female child in establishing a loving relationship with her father, can result in a child turning from hopes of happiness and fulfillment in a heterosexual relationship. She may return to a previous stage of love with her mother. Stemming from this theory we have the by now over-used term of 'penis-envy' with regard to lesbianism.

Taboos within Western culture at the time of Rodin were for a long time responsible for a noted immaturity in the social sciences and research into human sexual behaviour. At the turn of the last century scientific knowledge was restricted generally to the individual case studies of Freud and other psychologists. It is very doubtful that Rodin could have been aware of Freud's theories as they were not widely accepted until around the 1900's. But they are connected in their work by their will to explore and examine the roots of human behaviour and embodiment.

One predominant taboo connected with human sexual behaviour in Western society is that of the genitals. Afterall, they are commonly referred to as the 'private parts' (Ill. 14 & 15). This taboo is manifest in a situation where a young child is seen to be rubbing, examining or exhibiting his genitals to others. This attracts immediate adult attention and the child is most often castigated for his or her behaviour. Another taboo, within psychological structure, is that the genitals, due to their close proximity to the anus, are related to what is commonly perceived



Fig. 16

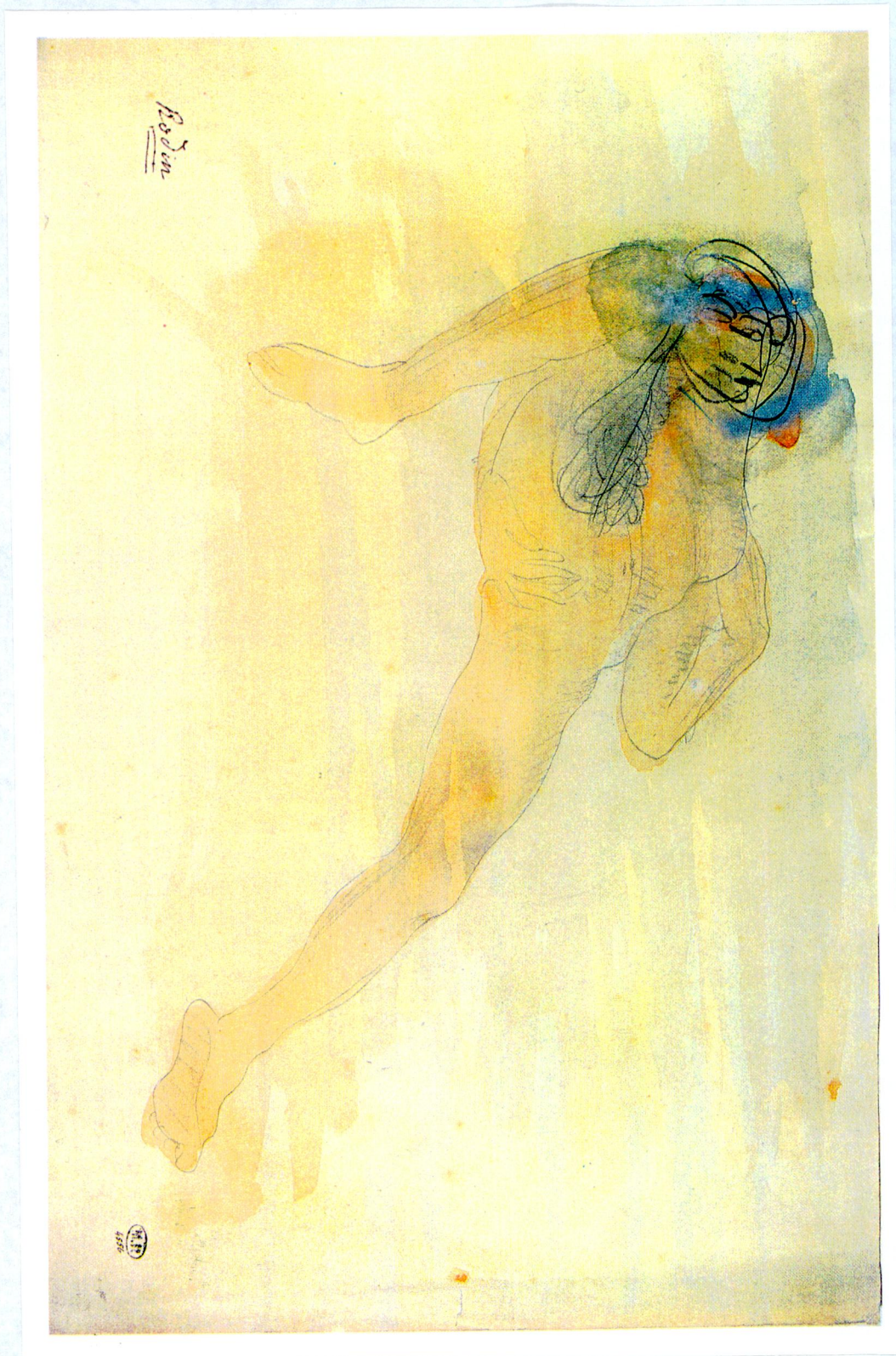
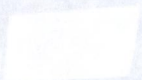


Fig. 17



as the 'dirtiest' of all body parts . This is in turn connected with societal concern with excretion and a belief that any substance once it leaves the body becomes 'unclean'.

These psychological views and inherent taboos in our society were more than likely a major contributor to the scandal which brewed over the erotic drawings of Rodin, around the turn of the century.

The drawings of Rodin, developed after the turn of the century were a progression from his earlier theme of tragic history to those based on the female figure. These drawings show us a direct confrontation and exploration by the artist of the female form and sexuality. They are also seen as a metamorphosis of his own personal and sexual desires, using this form as a means of expression. Brought into play here, as with Rodin's sculptural work, are erotic and mythological themes providing him with an opportunity to reveal woman in her various guises and as a way of showing her in every possible pose. The frantic speed and energy with which they were executed is also attributed to the artist's anxiety due to fear of old age and vanishing virility.

Rodin's drawings were exhibited widely around 1900, in places as far apart as Vienna, Budapest, Rotterdam, Rome, Germany and Brussels as well as in Paris. As the exhibitions opened across Europe, their scandalous reputation grew. In Rome in 1902, Catholic and Protestant critics described them as : " lewd, embracing bodies, making disgusting gestures."¹² However their greatest controversy arose when, in 1906, Rodin's drawings were exhibited in the aristocratic town of Weimar in Germany.

Early in 1905, Count Harry Kessler, director of the Grand Dukes Museum in Weimar, along with Rodin, made a selection of drawings to be presented to the Grand Duke Wilhelm of Saxony-Weimar and in turn to be exhibited in the Weimar Museum the following year, from January to March 1906. Somehow the first selection of drawings became mislaid in Rodin's studio at Meudon, so he himself made a second selection. When they were exhibited, the works came under severe attack from a Weimar painter named Hermann Behmer. On February seventeenth of that year he wrote :

"The works displayed are so shocking that we must warn our wives and daughters not to visit the exhibition. It is insolent of this forger to have presented our sovereign with such things and irresponsible of the organisers to have shown these disgusting drawings. " ¹³ These accusations led to the resignation of Count Kessler as head of the Museum's administrative board. The question we have to ask at this stage is how, by turn of the century standards, did these drawings cause such a scandal ?

Initially it is the artists technique comes under criticism. On first viewing the public may have deemed them as slapdash and unfinished, especially when they were compared with the predominant academic standards by which most contemporary drawings were constructed. This criteria was one which people expected from the art of this time. The line of Rodin's can be described as quick and energetic but is not necessarily true to the female forms he was observing. In addition to this line he would place quick watercolour washes and allowed them to bleed and blot where ever they pleased - indeed the resulting washes are reminiscent of human bodily fluids, such as blood and

semen(III. 16). This criticism is of course ignoring the obvious erotic elements of the work. Erotic art by definition being art of a sexual theme relating more specifically to emotions rather than actions, in short it is the aestheticized form of sexual representation.

Those viewing this body of drawings in the early years of this century were blatantly confronted by the sexualised female figure. These nudes had full figures with large breasts and strong hips and were featured in various poses which included figures exposing their sexual centres and masturbating . As previously mentioned, images of lesbianism which,although a common feature in nineteenth century art, this category of representations of women was more at home in the realm of the pornographic arts, in which it was made more specifically for the titillation and enjoyment of the male audience.

As we can see from the following comment , lesbian imagery was not very welcome when it crosses the boundariesbetween high and low art; the following statement is how Rodin's drawings were labelled in 1905: "Lesbianism, frenzy and paroxysm of sadism." In his experimentation with thisparticular type of image Rodin employed the technique of paper-cutouts to enhance his visions. He would unite two seperately drawn figures on one page to create interesting and heightened sexual meetings (III. 17).

An important point when discussing this artistic scandal, is that from Rodin's body of drawings he kept his most erotic and sexual from the eyes of the public. He kept a 'private collection' of about one hundred drawings for his eyes only in the Musee Rodin. From this collection only about ten are said to have warranted the label 'erotic'. His contemporaries were not aware

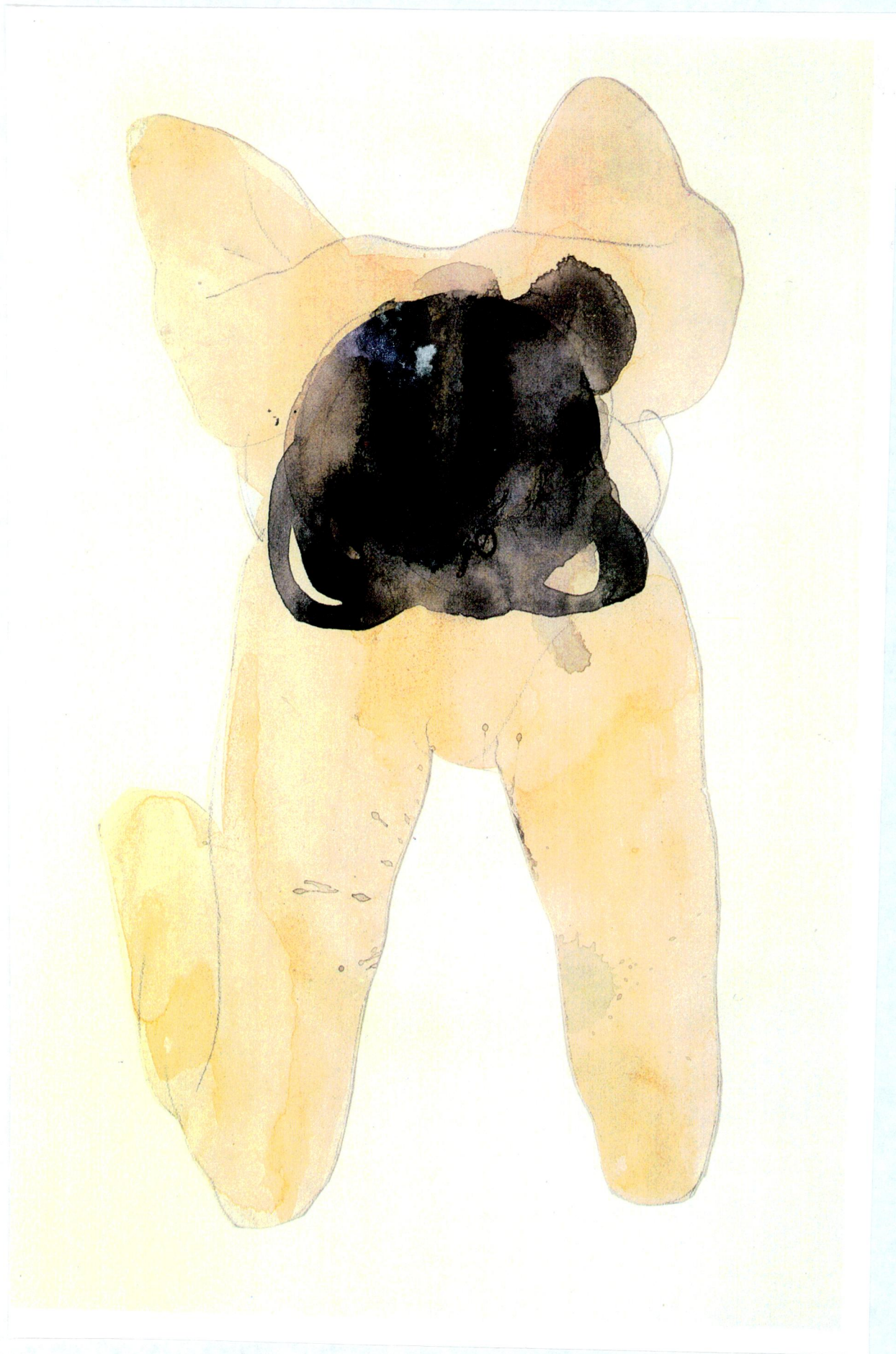
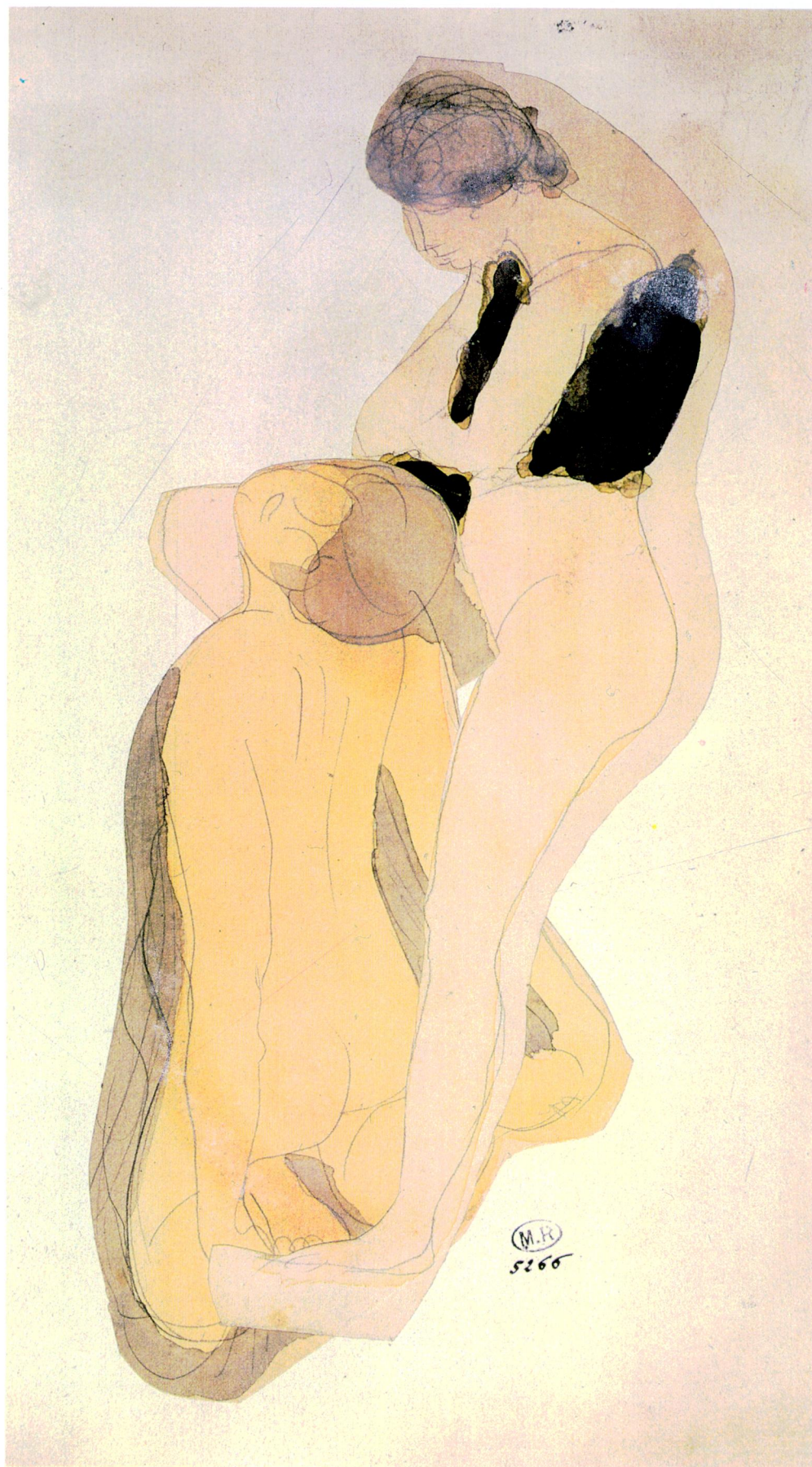


Fig. 18





Fig, 19



of these drawings existence and he himself was afraid of being misunderstood by them :

" What I say here is in no way intended to lead to the noisy promotion of my drawings. On the contrary, they should be gently protected so that the public will be roused to indignation " ¹⁴

Each era sets its own standards by which scandal and obscenity are defined and according to turn of the century standards, Rodin's drawings certainly crossed these boundaries. A point of note here, which will be further developed in Part 2, is that if Rodin kept his most erotic and sexual drawings in his private collection, how flagrant could the displays have been in those which he exhibited in the early years of this century?

PART 2

It is of great value to us today to reevaluate and reexamine the images of women in the work of Rodin, from the point of view of sexuality and gender. Since the turn of the last century we have witnessed vast advancements in the worlds of science and technology and further theories on human behaviour have come to the fore in the field of psychology. Are the depictions of the female form by Rodin seen any differently in the light of the changing role of women in our society and the evolution of Feminist art ? The viewpoints we formulate today must in some way differ from those that prevailed a hundred years ago.

Generally speaking, Feminist art today works to question and examine the representation of woman and the female body within the traditions of art history and the media. It aims to query the conventional concept of the female body as a symbol of male dominance and to analyse the desires that are projected onto the female body and image in art by male heterosexuality. There also exists a desire to rewrite female artists into the history of Western Art, thereby ending their omission in this narrative. According to Lynda Neal :

" In its articulation of differences, an engaged feminist practice necessarily breaks the boundaries of the High art aesthetic symbolised by the female nude. Unity and wholeness give way to differences and recognition that the female body is in a continual process of definition and change " ¹⁵

In Rodin's depictions of women the female nude exists primarily as an object of his artistic expression and an instrument

of articulation of his personal and sexual desires. These images are not intrinsically representative of female desires and sexuality and suffice to reiterate the predominance of male viewers and artists as an undisputed convention in art.

Even where we are faced with images of women masterbating, which is essentially a gesture of the autonomy of the female body as a source of personal pleasure for a woman. Rodin's manifestations of such in his work appear more as an interruption of female sexuality for its representation in art (and therefore to provide enjoyment and contemplation for the viewer). These female figures are suspended, forever to be looked upon, in their states of libidinous fervour (Ill. 19).

Strong, by the very nature of their expression, the depictions of women by Rodin did however butt against the conventionalised, academic female sexuality, held in great esteem by the Art Salons and public of Paris and much of Europe. In the drawing entitled ' Shell ' (Ill. 18), we are met with the stare of the artists model. However this eye contact with the viewer does not nurture the conventional ideal of the female nude as appearing in a state of vulnerability and attainability to the viewer. Here it is as if we are being enticed by the spell of this woman and are being quelled by the power of the representation of her sexuality, while she strains herself to the limit in order to expose her pudenda. This strange figural composition, like some others within the parameters of Rodin's drawings (Ill. 20) are portrayed in poses which are reminiscent of the Irish and European fertility figure - ' Sheela-na-gig ' (Ill. 21).

The women that are represented by Rodin, are tools in the transformation of matter to form in art and thereby place the

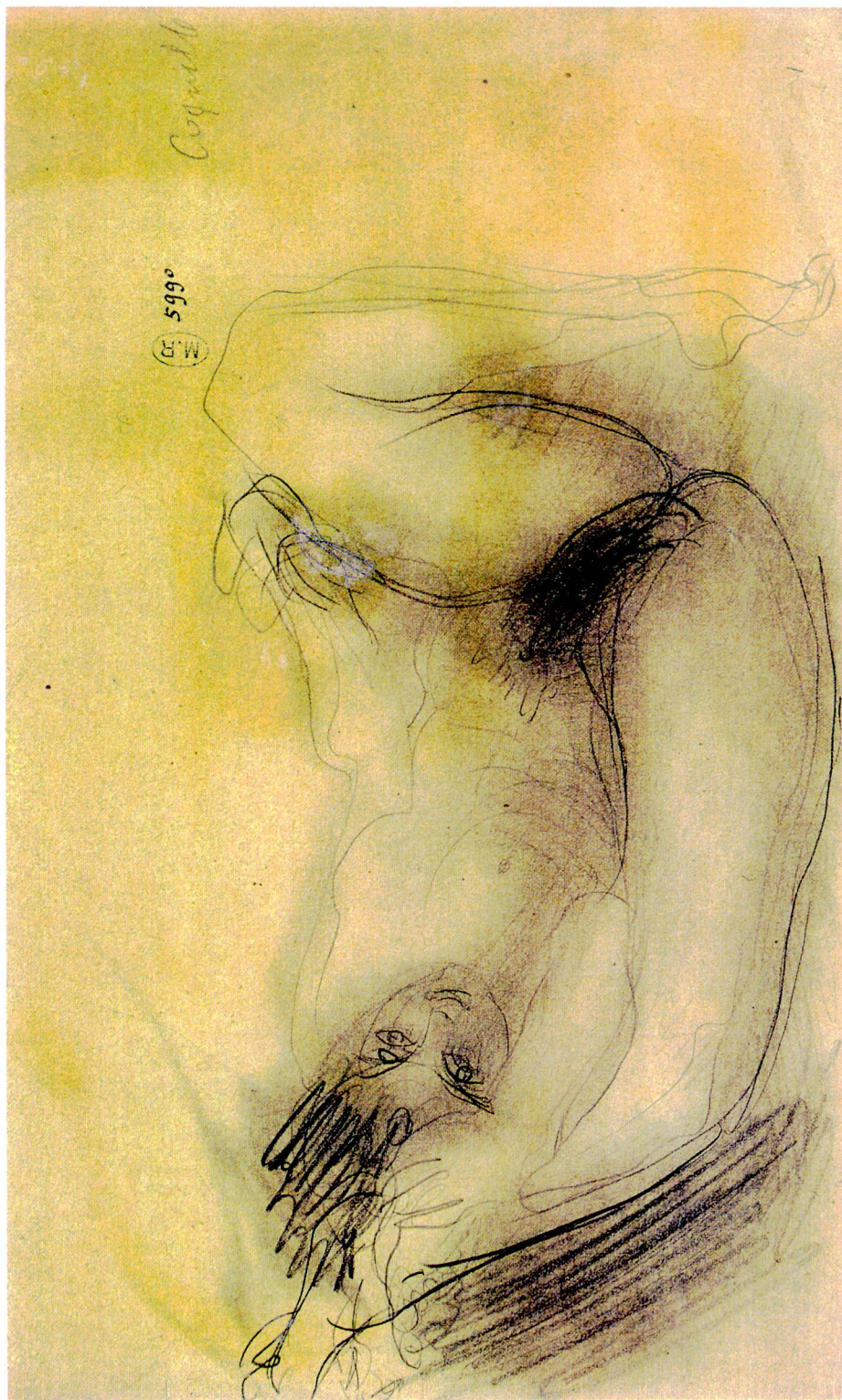
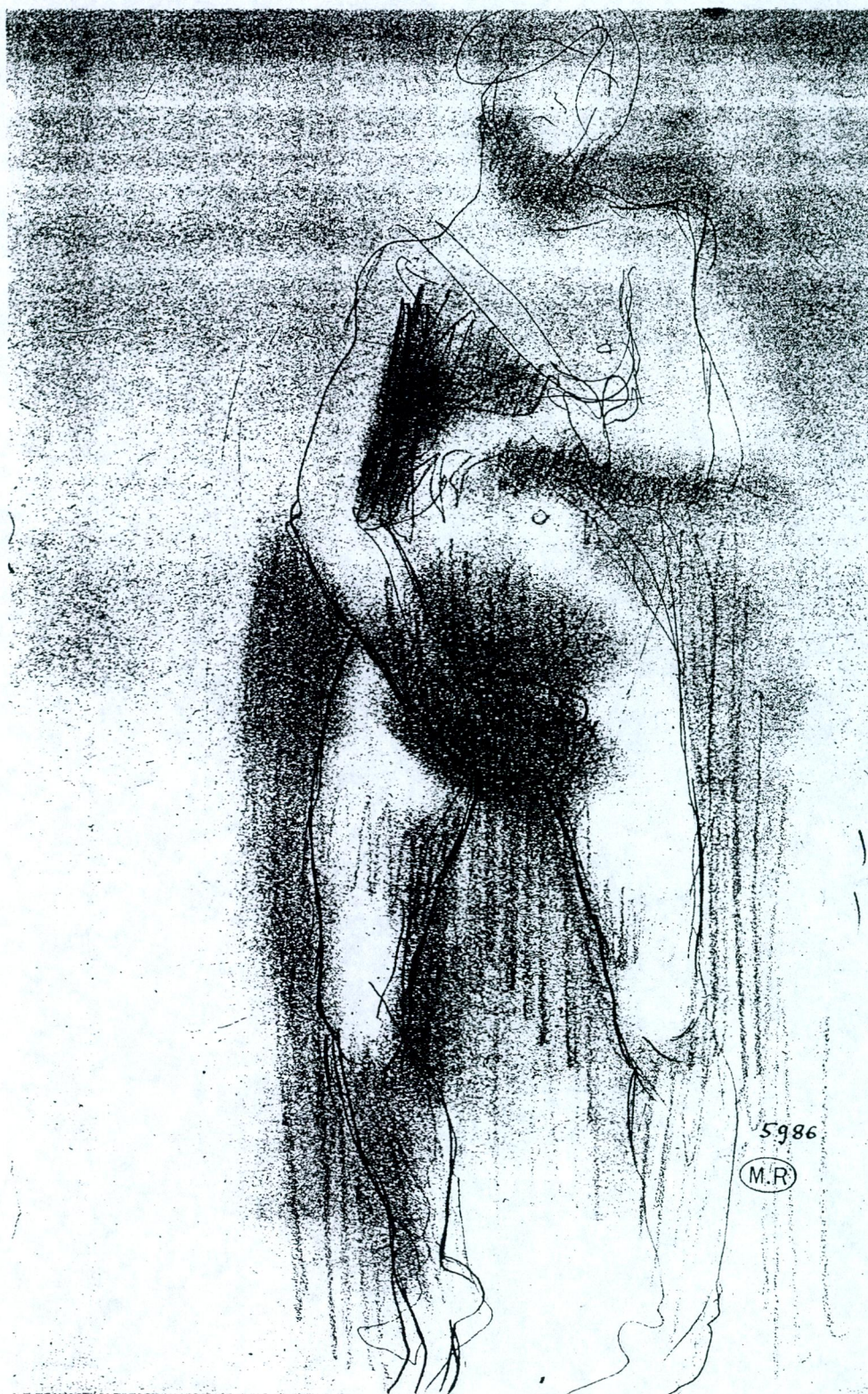


Fig. 20





Fig, 21



Fig, 22



Fig, 23

figure in the realm of idealised corporeality of the fine art nude. From this point of view, searching for strands of personality or identity in these models is futile, as it implies the reversion of the figure from the nude to the naked :

" Where woman is meant merely to tempt and nothing more, where she is spared the symbolic duties save that of proffering ripe and ready flesh, she is shown in the most vulnerable configurations of impassive invitation that merge the aesthetic with the obscene ." ¹⁶

The only motive we have to identify the model as a person or provide her with personal recognition, is when her identity has already been compounded into the history of the work, by - as mentioned in Part 1 - Rodin's reputation as a womaniser and the public curiosity this cultured. For example, in the sculptural works 'Thought' and 'Muse', the personalities of Camille Claudel and Gwen John respectively, have become firmly enmeshed in the history of the works of art. (Ill. 22 + 23)

The research and development made psychologists and psychoanalysts, especially Freud, and their theories on human sexual behaviour have strong echoes in our society this century. We have seen and experienced a sexual revolution since the time of Rodin which has prohibited open and liberal discussion and expression of sexuality and gender. In the words of Joan Fowler :

"Freud's theories of the unconscious and of sexuality have revolutionised our perception of gender and sexuality because they suggest that the split between the sexes is not all clear cut and that sexual orientation involves unconscious drives and energies across the sexes. " ¹⁷

Freud's theories on female psychology and sexual behaviour, did much to hinder women in their struggle for emancipation this century. His stereotypical portrayal of lesbians as penis-

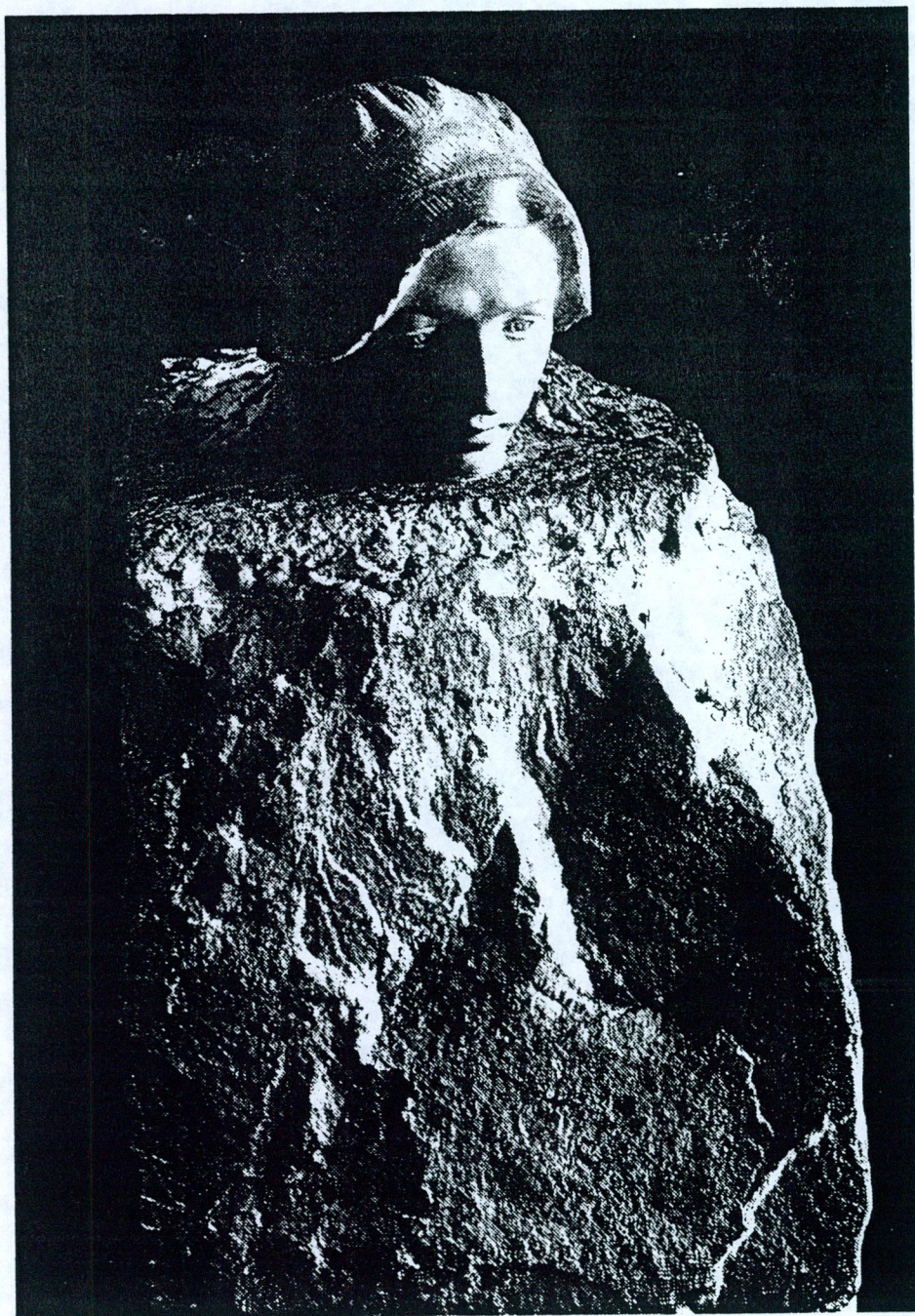


Fig. 24

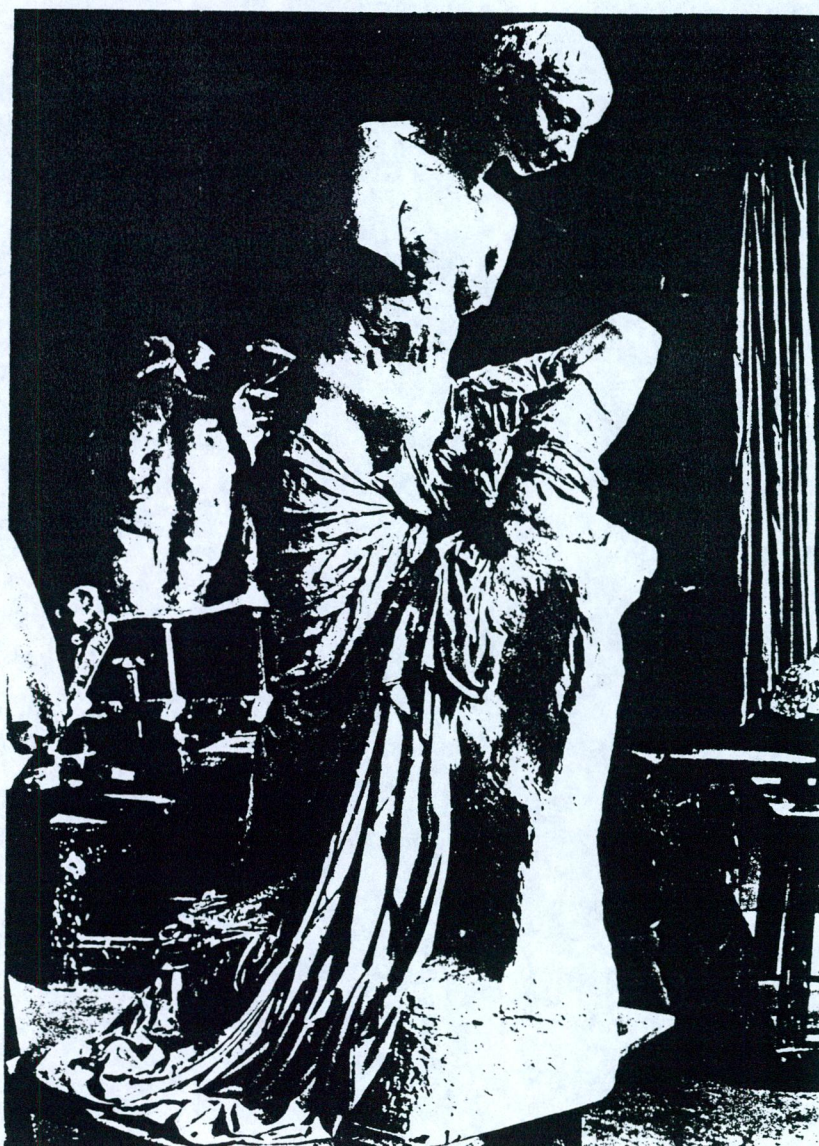


Fig 25

enviers caused the most damage and were central to much distress and discrimination against lesbians.

Depictions of lesbianism in western art generally exists as an object of male fantasy, stemming from curiosity about what women might get up to when close together and in an attempt to make erotic art more attractive and enriched by depicting more than one female nude.

Edward Lucre-Smith confirms that lesbianism is an attractive element of european art and indeed that it is the most richly represented of all sexual deviants. Among the reasons he gives for this is that:

"Freudian theory includes the hypothesis that a voyeuristic interest in lesbianism is directly linked to the voyeur's own castration fear. A woman who acts as if she already possessed a penis is, for the watcher, a reassuring spectacle, in that she is less likely to try and rob him of his own." 13

Although Rodin's images of lesbian love are attributed to studio experimentation - with separately modeled or drawn figures it is more obvious that they are representative, again, of his own sexual fantasies and were certainly appealing at the turn of the century. Since this time, lesbian imagery has gained autonomy as an honest and worthwhile expression of female homosexuality and desires. Lesbian artists have reclaimed their right to explore the representation of the female nude under the self-defined desires of women.

Our own personal identity and perception of self is judged primarily in relation to our personal environment, and is influenced by socially and culturally perceived physical and psychological judgements and categorizations. This is of more

influence today in our Post-Industrial society and exhausted culture where a subjects perception of their identity can be precarious. The art movement of our era - Post-Modernism - is by definition forming a challenge and sequel to modernism. One theory central to this movement is that of the 'Crisis of the Real' which defines fears in our society being increasingly taken over by technology. Images are being replicated by technology and these representations have in some ways destroyed the perception of reality, which leads to essential difficulty in accepting an image as real.

The female figure, today more than other times, is being judged and categorised by strict socially and culturally perceived ideals. The accepted ideal female shape for the 1990's is trim, lean, slim and healthy. Women today are exposed to greater amounts of body regulation, whether socially or personally exerted, than at the turn of the last century. A spin-off in this increase in body politics in the last two decades is the vast growth in the work-out and fitness industry and the increasing number of women suffering from Anorexia nervosa (Slimmer's Disease).

By twentieth century standards, The women in Rodin's work appear to be in excess of these body ideals and 'fat'. The reality seems to be that the women immortalised in Rodin's work are inherently more feminine and 'naturalistic' than our socially perceived ideals. From illustrations 24 and 25 we can recognise the disparity between these ideals.

With regard to the realistic nature and more honest portrayal of the female figure, Rodin exerted more freedom in his drawings than in his sculptural work. On paper he more freely



Fig 26

expressed the essential curvature and voluptuousness of his female subjects. This said, his sculptural works were far from the soft and delicate physicality of the academically gauged nudes of the Salons.

The theoreis and ideals of representation of sexuality and eroticism have evolved somewhat since the time of Rodin and have been developed and exploited immensely as an integral element of twentieth century art. The standards of morality by which erotic works are judged have changed since his time, particularly in France where the Roman Catholic Church kept a watchful eye on the preservation of high moralistic standards in turn of the century society.

A viewer coming to Rodin's erotic drawings under twentieth century standards would probably consider them tame and harmless. As an artist, he is by now respected as the 'Grandfather' of twentieth century sculpture, he who saved and revitalised it when it was at it's lowest ebb in history and used it as an exciting medium of creative expression. This respect which Rodin has gained prevents any negative promotion of his work.

However the scandal of his drawings is still with us to an extent today. Curiously, when Rodin died in 1917, a number of his erotic works were withdrawn from exhibition, perhaps in an attempt to curb his scandalous reputation? When we assess this category of drawings on a par with his complete body of drawings , one wonders if one hundred (ten of which are said to warrant the label erotics) out of eight thousand is enough to credit such a reputation. However one cannot deny the existance of an air of scandal about these works which, in summary, stems from the prudish moralistic standards that were prevalent a

hundred years ago and the calumny caused by the artist's infamous private life and various liasons.

A point of interest with regard to the art historic criticism of erotic works of art is, gereralisation of the artist's technique as masculine and the corresponding surface (paper/ canvas), as feminine. We find this with view to Rodin's work in the following quote:

"Thanks to his models , Rodin concentrated first on what he could see close up: vaginas open and moist, with lips spread apart, flecked with blood or sperm... this delineation of the erotic is precise, yet never scientific, anatomical or gynecological. The vaginal lips open to greet the phallic pencil or brush."

So now , we find that through the means of art criticism, there is a further reinforcement of male dominance of the female nude in sexuality.

In his depiction of virginal beauty in the drawing 'Sleeping girl' (Ill. 26) it appears that Rodin has, unwittingly put this concept into practice. By his tactful use of watercolour and a simple white wash on the figure portrayed, one would think that the paper has been saturated and the only thing saved, the young girl's purity.

At this point in the discussion we must ask ourselves the question - Are Rodin's erotic artworks pornographic? To do this it is necessary to define the terms High art, Erotic art and Pornography. Art, by definition is the skill applied to a subject of taste in which the resulting artpiece aims to raise the viewer to contemplation of the mind. In short, it is form within limits. According to Clark: "The moment art becomes an incentive to action it loses its true character." ¹⁹



Fig 27



Erotic art, as defined in Part 1, is the aestheticised form of sexual representation, art with a sexual theme that relates specifically to emotions rather than actions. Integrally, erotic art exists as a boundary or middle ground between art and pornography.

Pornography served as art in which sexual desires are stimulated and gratified and it exists in the realm of the profane and mass culture. It lacks essentially in taste; its aim is to bring about sexual catharsis in the viewer and to move the viewer in the direction of action. The power of pornography is mostly centered on its use of the photographic image which gives the viewer a naturalistic 'realism' and perception of the object portrayed, giving immediate gratification. The images of pornography are mass produced, getting them to a large audience, cheaply.

If these are the basic criteria under which pornography is defined then we must assume that Rodin most definitely tested the limits of erotic art, especially by the turn of the century standards of morality. But, did not venture into the realms of pornography.

This judgement is based on the fact that Rodin kept his most erotic works in his private collection. His initial reaction in the presence of his female nudes was to draw them frantically and to be spurred into artistic creation. These works were not intended for public viewing and as discussed in part one, his contemporaries were not even aware that this collection existed. Rodin himself was warned that if they became exposed he would be disgraced.

Today, reproductions of Rodin's erotic drawings are becoming more available, what still differentiates them from pornography is that they are not mass produced. They are not marketed for consumption by the mass culture. They are reproduced in the category of art history and aimed primarily at the scholar. A prime function of the Musee Rodin in Paris is to protect the artist's work, and by doing so to prevent the deterioration of this art into the realm of pornography.

Conclusion :

Ultimately, when examining the work of Auguste Rodin and his depictions of the female form, one has to admire the fervent energy and vitality he imbued to his subjects and the resulting strength and visual impact. He went beyond the expectations of the Art Salons of his day, the images and work he created were far more physically powerful and energetic than their contemporaries and in some ways were too realistic for them.

Rodin differed and deviated from the contemporary traditional accepted representation of the female nude in the Neo-classical idiom. His work and eventual fame depended on this as a comparison to strengthen his artistic status and significance.

Certain aspects of Rodin's work appear to anticipate the liberation women were to gain in the twentieth century; he depicted female figures of equal status and power to their male suitors and women in the throes of exploring (and enjoying) their own sexuality. Particularly in his erotic drawings of the new

century, he brought to his models a history of liaisons with women and a fear of vanishing virility. Rodin's depictions of women exist essentially as a compliment, to and as an object of, his male desires.

As discussed in Part 2 these drawings verged on the obscene and the pornographic. The image of the female body does not only depend on the content of the image, but where and how the image is seen; who has access to it the behaviour and response of the viewer. Art and pornography are defined in terms of quality, ownership and access. They are entangled in a cycle of reciprocal definition.

It is not critical to offer a formulae of definitive judgements on Rodin's portrayal of the female form, his working methods, private life or status in his historical context. This artists work is of more value to us as a resource of varied and valuable interpretations, and this is what this discussion has aimed to point out.

ENDNOTES :

- 1: Rodin quoted by S. Salzmann, 'Innovative Energies in the work of Rodin ', from R. Crone & S. Salzmann (editors) 'Rodin - Eros and Creativity.', P. 190.
- 2: K. Clark, 'The Nude', P. 198.
- 3: L. Neal, 'The Female Nude', P. 47.
- 4: For example see J. Hawkins introduction in the V&A catalogue 'Rodin Sculptures'.
- 5: L. Nochlin, 'Eroticism and the Female Image in Nineteenth Century Art' from ' Women, Art and Power and Other Essays ',P. 143.
- 6: L. Nochlin, *ibid*, P. 142.
- 7: G. Danto, 'Rodin - Erotic Inspiration in Nature' from R. Crone & S. Salzmann, *op cit.*, P. 196.
- 8: A. E. Elsen, 'Rodin's Works in Plaster' from 'Rodin Rediscovered', P. 144.
- 9: P. Gsell, 'Art - Conversations with Auguste Rodin ', P. 49-50.
- 10: See 'Women's Movement', *Colliers Encyclodedia*, Vol. 23, P. 562-566.
- 11: Rodin quoted by C. Jurdin, 'Rodin's Scandalous Drawings', from R. Crone & S. Salzmann, *op cit.*, P. 148.
- 12: C. Jurdin, *op cit.*, P. 148.
- 13: C. Jurdin, *op cit.*, P. 147.
- 14: C. Jurdin, *op cit.*, P. 148.
- 15: L. Neal, 'The Female Nude', P. 33.
- 16: G. Danto, 'Rodin - Erotic Inspiration in Nature', from R. Crone

& S. Salzmänn, op cit, P. 201.

- 17: J. Fowler, 'Speaking of Gender...', from 'A New Tradition - Irish Art in the Eighties', P. 60.
- 18: E. Lucie-Smith, 'Sexuality in Western Art', P. 203.
- 19: K. Clark quoted in L. Neal, op cit., P. 27.

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