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National College of Art and Design  
Faculty of Craft Design (Glass)

The Psychology of Movement in the Work of  
Auguste Rodin

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## INTRODUCTION

Georges Rodenbach, the Belgian poet, thought that once again, thanks to Rodin, sculpture was a living art.<sup>1</sup> How right he was. Rodin took from life the movements he observed, but it was not he who imposed them, he allowed nature to govern his art. He reproduced what reality spontaneously offered him. For Rodin it was solely the power of character which makes for beauty in art. Perhaps the uglier a being is in nature, the more beautiful it becomes in Art, for there is nothing ugly in art, except that which is without character, that is to say, that which offers no outer or inner truth.

As for the Ancient Greeks, the beauty of the body in all its ecstasy and life captivated Rodin. By the time he became a sculptor, the academic world killed character spontaneity and fluidity in its sculptural representations of the human being, by making the models take up specific poses, devoid of emotion or expression. Even in Rodin's sculptures, where there is no apparent movement, when the figure appears to be at rest, the palpitating muscles still seem to quiver with emotion and the activities of the mind.

In this thesis, I intend to show how Rodin achieved not only physical movement in his sculptural works and drawings, but also psychological movement. In Chapter One I shall discuss Rodin's method of working, his style of drawing and his influences.

Rodin insisted that it is only the artist who can succeed in producing the impression of movement, in a scientific image i.e. photography, time is abruptly suspended, where in fact, in reality, time does not stop.<sup>2</sup> In Chapter Two, how

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Butler, Rodin, The Shape of Genius p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> Auguste Rodin, Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell, p. 34.





Rodin succeeds, where photography fails, will be discussed, by describing his skill of modelling and movement, and how he achieves scenic succession in sculpture as if read in a book or watched in a play.

Some critics blame Rodin for his inspiration being more literary than plastic. They declare that art is not the place for so much philosophic ambition. But Rodin does not exclude thought from his art, as the body always expresses the spirit. This I shall discuss in Chapter Three.

Rodin tried to achieve not only realism, but psychological realism and I shall examine this in *The Monument to Claude Lorrain* and in *The Gates of Hell*, where his 'Thinker', represents the suffering peculiar to the psychology of fin-de-siècle man.

Rodin's final years, were preoccupied by dance - Diaghlev's Ballets Russes, Nijinsky, the fascinating flow of the movements of Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller. There were also the little Cambodian dancers who provided Rodin with poses which his ordinary models were unable to do. All of these, as well as Rodin's love of women, whom were a constant inspiration to his work, in particular Camille Claudel, with whom he had a passionate affair with from 1883 to 1892. These years coincided with the creation of his most impassioned works. There was also Rose Beuret, who remained loyal to him for fifty three years and whom he finally married in 1917. Catherine Lampert saw him as the first sculptor to want to make women's sexuality important.<sup>3</sup> He saw in women energetic power and grace and emotion, which exuberated from the internal to the surface of the human figure. This is the topic of my final chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Butler, Rodin The Shape of Genius, page 440.



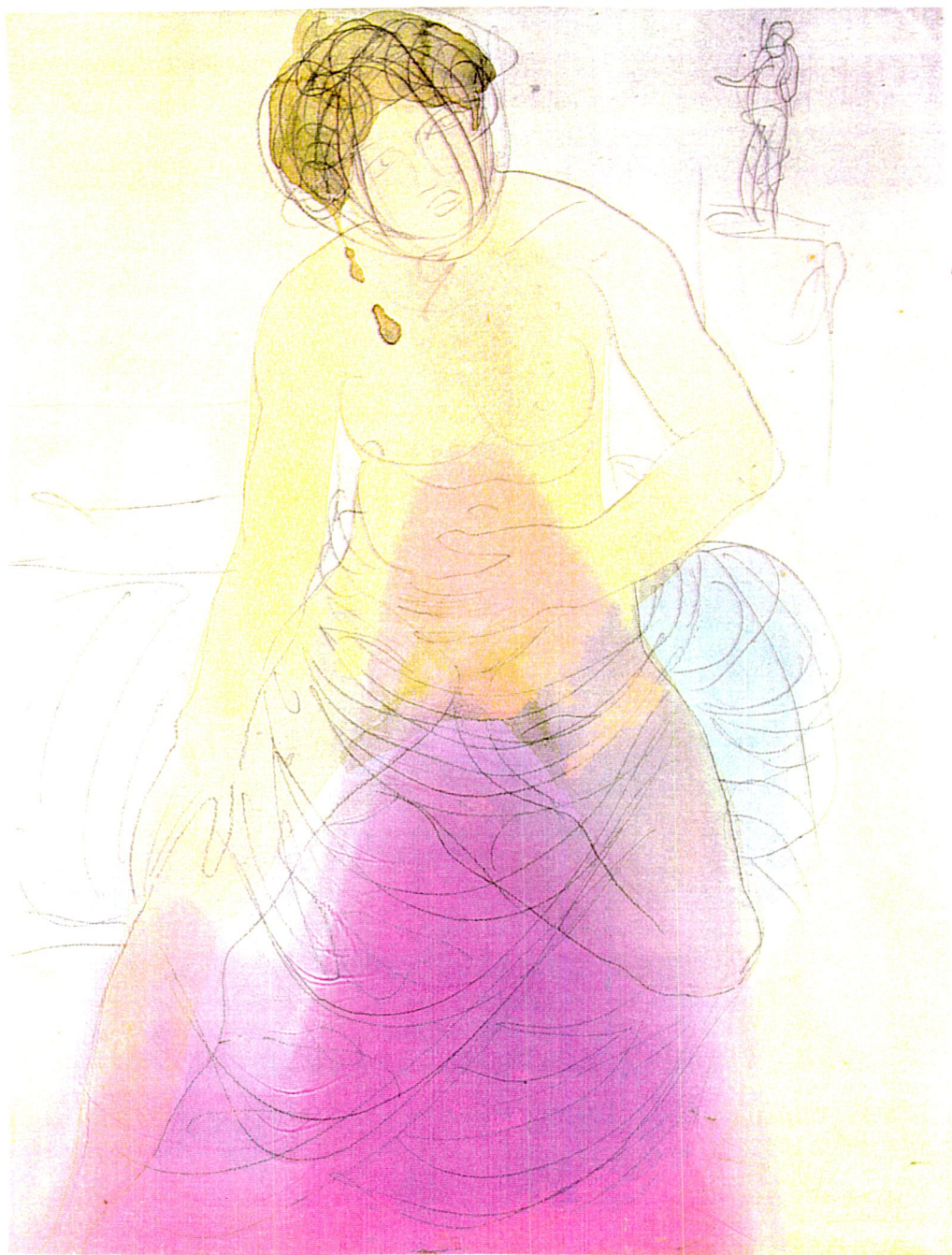


Fig 1. Female nude in the studio.





## CHAPTER ONE

When Rodin died in 1917 and his estate went to the French nation, it contained over 400 distinct sculptures and over 7,000 drawings, a life's work on their own. He drew constantly. From Michelangelo he learned principles entirely opposite to what he had been taught. The Renaissance sculptor liberated Rodin from academic methods, he set him free.

In 1854, at the age of fourteen, Rodin entered the Petite Ecole, where the objective was to master a variety of styles and learn to copy accurately. Most of the time was spent copying Renaissance and Baroque Art. Lecoq a teacher there, trained his students to depend on their memory.<sup>1</sup> It was here also that he was made aware of his ignorance of literature. Speaking to his friend Hélène Wahl, Rodin said 'You know that I am no scholar, and that having to write and speak embarrasses me, clay and pencils are my natural means of expression.'<sup>2</sup> He enrolled in the Collège de France, Paris, to study history and erase his ignorance of literature. According to Judith Cladel, Rodin absorbed Homer, Virgil, Dante, Victor Hugo, de Musset and Lamartine.

In Rodin's studio, his models roamed freely around the room. Rodin became familiar with the sight of the nude moving with all the freedom of life, bringing with it, the familiarity of moving muscles. By not permitting his eyes to leave the model for an instant and by allowing his quick and well-trained hand to roam freely over the drawing paper, Rodin seized an enormous number of unaccustomed poses and unrecorded gestures. When a particular pose caught his attention, he ordered the model to hold it until he himself captured it.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Lampart, *Rodin Sculptures and Drawings*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Butler, *Rodin The Shape of Genius*, p. 298



Not since the athletic contests of the Ancient Greeks and Romans had sculptors observed unclothed human bodies in constant motion. Rodin was above all interested in conveying motion.<sup>3</sup> For Rodin, the continual presence of nudes roaming freely before his eyes allowed him to learn to read the feelings expressed in every part of the body. The face is generally considered the only mirror of the soul, but in reality, there is not a muscle of the body which does not express interior emotion:

"All speak of joy or of sorrow, of enthusiasm or of despair, of serenity or of madness. Outstretched arms, an unconstrained body, smile with as much sweetness as the eyes or the lips."<sup>4</sup>

In comparison to Rodin's style of work, his confrères at the time had their models mount a pedestal in front of them, instructing them to take a particular pose, bending or straightening the head, arms or legs, to suit them, as if they were clay. Rodin on the contrary, waited until the model naturally and unintentionally took an interesting attitude which pleased him, and then instantly asked that the pose be kept. Then he quickly seized the clay, and formed a little figure, keeping in mind the ensemble of the pose and insisting the model conform to his memory of it.

When Paul Gsell visited Rodin in his studio, to watch him work, Gsell implies that it is Rodin who seems to be at the model's orders rather than they at his. Rodin quickly rose to the defence, explaining that he was :

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<sup>3</sup> William Harlan Hale, *The World of Rodin*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Rodin on Art and Artists, *Conversations with Paul Gsell*, p. 10.





"Not at their orders, but at those of nature! My confères doubtless have their reasons for working as you have said. But thus doing violence to nature and treating human beings like puppets, they run the risk of producing lifeless and artificial work."<sup>5</sup>

Rodin on the other hand reproduced the movements that reality spontaneously offers him.

"I obey nature in everything and I never pretend to command her. My only ambition is to be servilely faithful to her."<sup>6</sup>

Rodin goes on to state that artists do not see nature as she appears to a lay person.

"Oh doubtless a mediocre man copying nature will never produce a work of art, because he really looks without seeing and though he may have noted each detail minutely, the result will be flat and without character. But the profession of artist is not meant for the mediocre, and to them the best counsels will never succeed in giving talent . . . The artist, on the contrary, sees, that is to say, that his eye grafted on his heart, reads deeply into the bosom of nature. That is why the artist has only to trust to his eyes."<sup>7</sup>

Rodin's drawings are genuine representations of the human body. He sometimes used a pen, sometimes a pencil. In his earlier drawings, Rodin drew the outline with a pen and then added the shading with a brush. He moved on to the pencil,

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<sup>5</sup> ibid p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> ibid, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> ibid, p. 13.



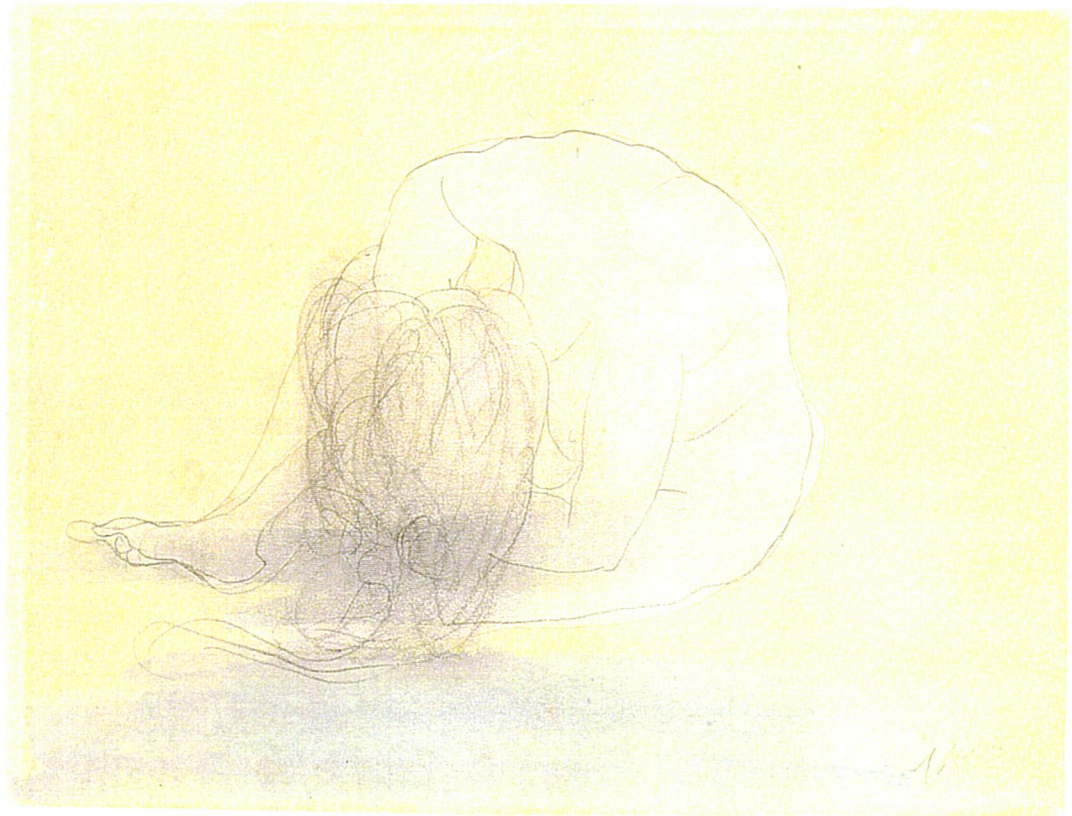


Fig 2. Female nude seated.





washing in the flesh tones in colour. These pencil drawings Figs. 1, 2, 3 are free and gestural, where his graphic touch seems almost frenzied - a whole body held in one single sweep of the pencil, emphasising the empathy of the artist who fears that a fleeting impression may escape him. The colouring of the flesh is dashed on in a few broad strokes, and the dry pools of colour, where the brush in its haste had not absorbed the residue, created the modelling. These sketches fix the rapid gesture, the transient motion, which the eye had barely seized for one half second. They not only capture line and colour, they capture movement and life. While capturing movement in his drawings, the colour sometimes flows over the line, giving a 3-D effect. Searching to convey the effect of movement, he developed a technique of sticking paper in layers. Here he was anticipating the works of Matisse and Picasso.<sup>8</sup>

Rodin would examine his models from above, below and several angles, portraying all these profiles. His technique of modelling in clay involved a painstaking study of the outlines of the body. First he scrutinized his subject from different angles. Then, working very close to the model, he successively reproduced each profile, turning his stand and the model until he had completely circled the body. Unlike most sculptors of his day, he usually relied on his eye rather than on calipers to check the accuracy of the clay outlines against the original.<sup>9</sup> This approach required keen powers of observation and exceptional hand-eye coordination.

In 1875, Rodin at the age of 35, set off for Italy, aware of the 400th anniversary of Michelangelo's birth, which was commemorated by special exhibitions of his work. Rodin's intention was to discover the secret of movement in Michelangelo's work. He wrote to Rose Beuret (who became his wife in 1917) from Florence in 1875:

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<sup>8</sup> Monique Laurent, Rodin p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> William Harlan Hale, The World of Rodin, p. 9.





Fig 3. Reclining nude.





"I think that the great magician (Michelangelo) is yielding a few of his secrets. All the same, none of his pupils or his masters can do what he does, the secret is in him, and him alone."<sup>10</sup>

What Rodin returned to Paris with was not a portfolio of sketches with useful 'secrets', nor the motifs of the Renaissance masters. Instead, his visit resulted in a personal and intoxicating memory of what it was like to experience great art.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Monique Laurent, Rodin p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Lampert, Rodin Sculptures and Drawings, p. 13.





Fig 4. The Age of Bronze (1875-1877).



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Science of Modelling and Movement

How can masses of stone and bronze be seen to move? How do figures, so evidently motionless, appear to act? For a sculptor, wishing the spectator to interpret joy or sorrow, any passion whatsoever cannot evoke an emotion without first giving the illusion of life to his figure. The answer lies in the skill of good modelling and movement: "These two qualities are like the blood and the breath of all good work."<sup>1</sup>

Rodin explained that "movement is the transition from one altitude to another".<sup>2</sup> To explain this transition Rodin took a vivid example from Dantes *Inferno*, where a serpent coiling itself around the body of one of the damned, changes into the man as the man becomes reptile, allowing one to follow the struggle between two natures and to see a part of what was, while we discover a part of what is to be.

So how does a sculptor compel us, the spectator, to follow the development of an act in a figure? In Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* (1875 - 1877) Fig. 4, as the eye mounts from the youth's legs - which appear lax, as the figure is not yet fully awake - the pose becomes firmer. The ribs rise beneath the skin, the chest expands, the face is lifted towards the sky and the two arms stretch in an effort to throw off their torpor. The subject of this sculpture is the passage from somnolence to that of action.

In the following year, 1878, Rodin tackled another major subject, *St. John the Baptist*, Fig. 5. This time he made it larger than life, to refute accusations of

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<sup>1</sup> Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*







Fig 5. St. John the Baptist (1878).





*surmoulage*, which haunted him after critics suggested his *Age of Bronze* was cast from a live model. Here the sculptor anticipated one of the major problems of 20th century art - how to integrate the notion of time and movement into sculpture. This became the concern of the Futurist Boccioni and the Cubists. The rhythm of his figure of *St. John the Baptist* provides an evolution between two balances. The figure leaning at first its weight upon the left foot, presses the ground with all its strength. One can see all the body bent in that direction, then the right leg advances. At the same time the left shoulder which is raised, seems to endeavour to bring the weight of the body to this side in order to aid the leg, which is behind, to come forward. This succession gives the impression of movement.

In explaining the act of movement captured in his *St. John the Baptist*, Rodin suggested in an instantaneous photograph of a walking figure, similar to that of his sculpture, that the model would appear paralysed in his pose, as the photo would show the back foot already raised and carried forward towards the other; or, on the contrary, the front foot would not yet be on the ground. The photographer Muybridge, did in fact come close, in his experiments with photography and movement, Fig. 6. Despite the moving-picture and slow-motion cameras we now possess, little has been learned that Muybridge did not discover. His last two books *Animals in Motion* (1899) and *The Human Figure in Motion* (1901), abridgements of a larger work entitled *Animal Locomotion*, published in 1887 under the University of Pennsylvania, are still the basic authorities on the movements and gaits natural to most animals, particularly to man and horse.<sup>3</sup> Rodin argued that there is no progressive development of movement shown in photography, as there can be in art, because figures in instantaneous photographs though taken while the subject is moving, seem suddenly fixed in mid-air. This is due to all parts of the body being reproduced exactly at the same twentieth of a second. Arguing against the deforming treachery of stop-action images, Rodin asserted to Paul Gsell that :

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<sup>3</sup> Eadweard Muybridge, *Animals in Motion*, p. 9.





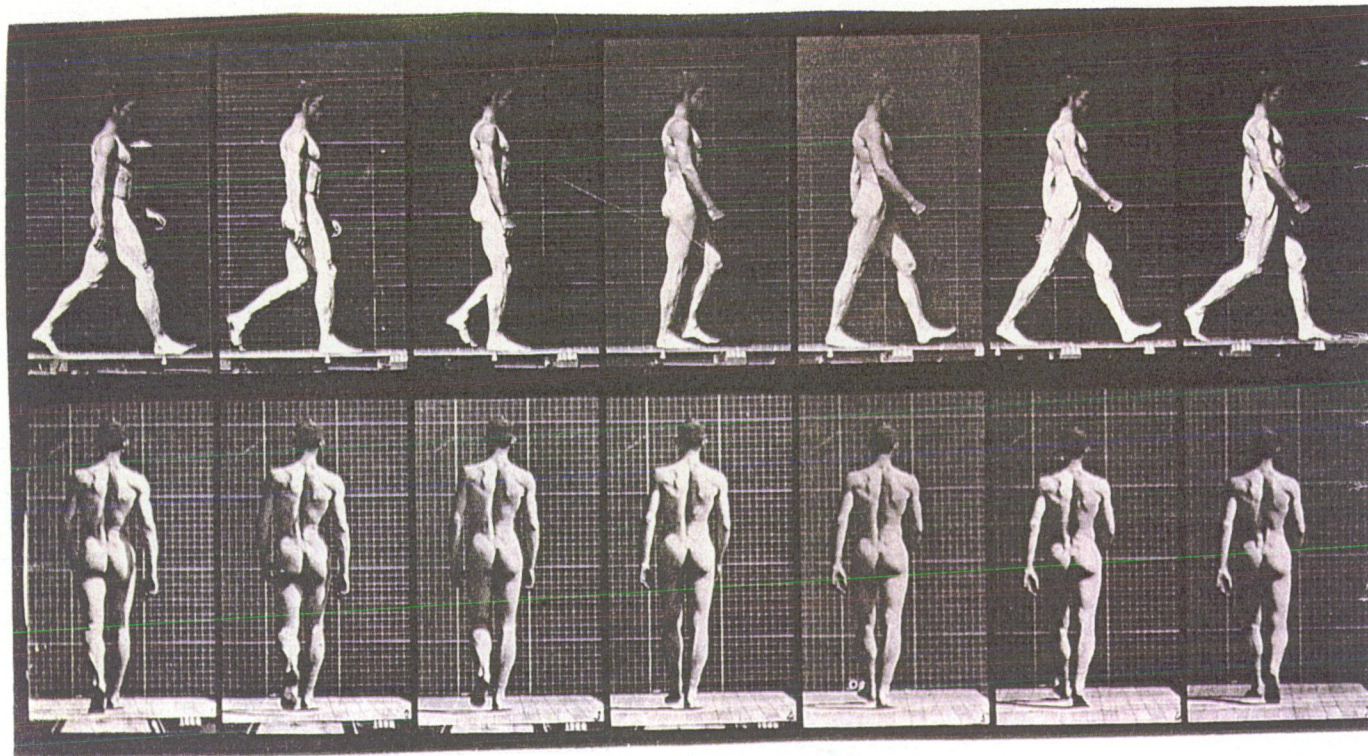


Fig 6. Muybridge: man walking





"It is the artist who is truthful and it is photography which lies, for in reality time does not stop, and if the artist succeeds in producing the impression of a movement which takes several moments to accomplishment, his work is certainly less conventional than the scientific image, where time is abruptly suspended. Where in fact in reality, time does not stop.<sup>4</sup>

Géricault is criticised by the academics because in this painting *The Epsom Downs Derby* (1821), which is in the Louvre, he has painted his horses galloping, throwing their forefeet forward and their hind feet backwards at the same time Fig. 7. In Fig. 8, Muybridge almost captures this, but the forelegs of the horse are forward and the hind legs having by their pause propelled the body onward, already had time to gather themselves under the body in order to recommence the stride, so that for a moment the four legs are almost gathered together in the air, giving the animal the appearance of jumping off the ground and of being motionless in this position.

Rodin believed that it was Géricault who was right and not the camera, for his horses appear to run. He achieves this because he forces the spectator to see from right to left, first the hind legs accomplishing the effort, then the body stretched out then the forelegs seeking the ground ahead. This of course is an illusion. For in reality, the actions could not be simultaneous, but it is true when the parts are observed successively.<sup>5</sup>

It is one task to succeed in condensing the action of several moments into a single figure, but to represent several successive scenes in the same painting or sculptural group is even more challenging. Again Rodin explains the theory to Paul Gsell. In order for the artist to succeed, the spectator must first see those who begin this action, then those who continue it, and finally those who complete it.

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<sup>4</sup> Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*







Fig 7.

The Epson Downes Derby

by Gericault (1821).





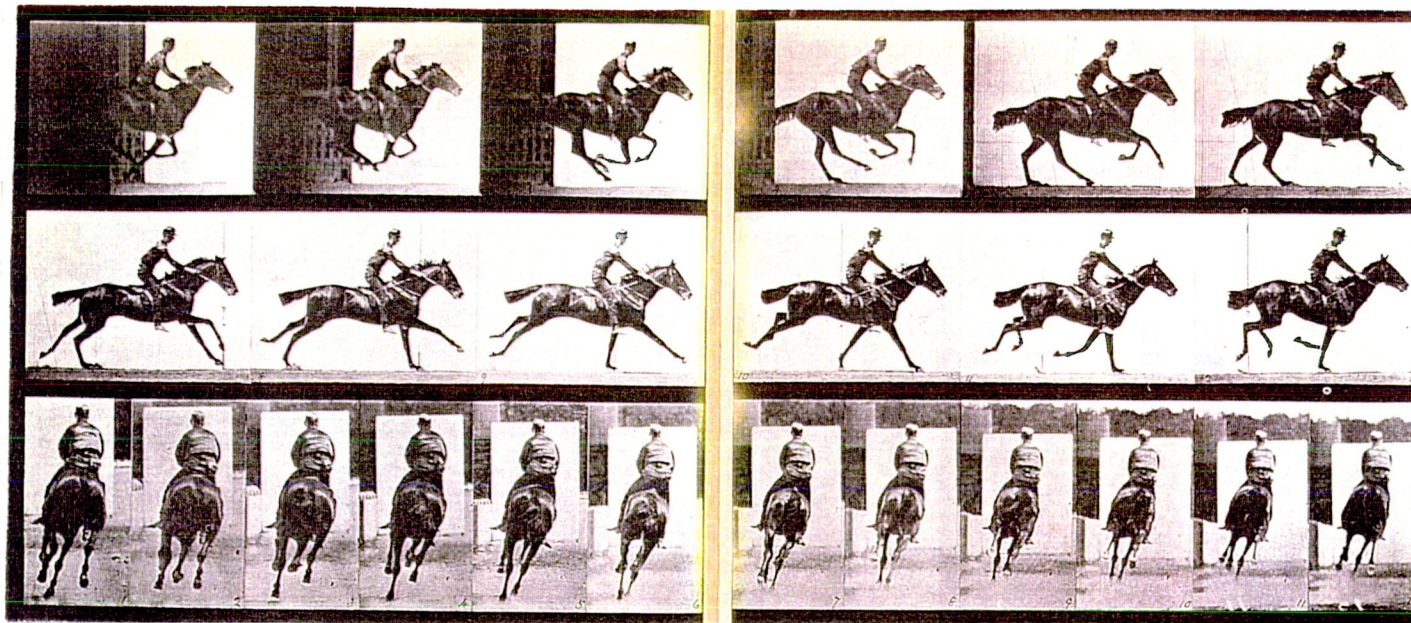


Fig 8. Muybridge: Horse galloping.





Rodin's sculptural group *The Burghers of Calais* (studies began in 1884, not unveiled until 1895), is probably the best example of this scenic succession Fig. 9. The central figure, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, first attracts our attention. He bows his head, but does not hesitate and does not appear to be afraid. He advances steadily and it is he who inspires the others, because it is he who offered himself first as one of the six, whose death would save their fellow-townsmen from massacre. The Burgher beside him is not less brave, as he stiffens his whole body in order to find the strength to bear the inevitable humiliation. He holds in his hand the key which he must deliver to the English. This man would live for many years, but now his life is in its last hours and this he can hardly bear. His lips are tightly pressed together. There is fire in his strength.

To the left of these two, a figure walks almost too fast, as if he is trying to shorten the time that separates him from his martyrdom. Behind these is another burgher who holds his head in his hands despairingly. Perhaps he is thinking of his loved ones left behind. A fifth burgher stumbles, as his hand passes before his eyes to block out the nightmare. Finally the sixth burgher advances, his neck outstretched, a painful anxiety enveloping his face. He turns back, right arm raised, hand open in the air, as though to let go, as one gives freedom to a bird. This gesture is symbolic of a departure from all uncertainty.

Therefore in *The Burghers of Calais*, the eye follows the action. Each Burgher is positioned according to his authority, each one following the example and influence of the first - Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Rodin realised how each one stood there, prepared to give their lives for the sake of their old city. Rodin then no longer saw the forms of these men, but their gestures, of renunciation, of farewell, of resignation. To emphasize the effect of this scenic succession, Rodin wanted to place his statues one behind the other on stones before the Town Hall of Calais, as a living monument to suffering and sacrifice so that the people of Calais today







Fig 9. The Burghers of Calais ( began 1884 , unveiled 1895.)





could walk amongst them. However his proposal was rejected and a pedestal was insisted on.

Rodin's figures, instead of being merely superficial, seem to blossom from within, like life itself. Instead of imagining the different parts of a body as surfaces more or less flat, he represents them as projections of interior volumes. He expressed in each swelling of the torso, or of the limbs, the efflorescence of a muscle or of a bone which lay deep beneath the skin. Rodin had learned this art of modelling from the sculptor Constant Simon when he began as a young sculptor:

"When you carve, never see the form in length, but always in thickness, never consider a surface except as the extremity of a volume, as the point, more or less large, which it directs towards you. In that way you will acquire the science of modelling."<sup>6</sup>

According to Rodin, a great sculptor is as much a colorist as the best painter.

"He plays so skillfully with all the resources of relief, he blends so well the boldness of light with the modesty of shadow, that his sculptures please one as much as the most charming etchings. Colour is the flower of fine modelling. These two qualities always accompany each other, and it is these qualities which give to every masterpiece of the sculptor, the radiant appearance of living flesh."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*.





Fig 10. The Walking Man (1877).



## CHAPTER THREE

### Adding Meaning of Form

"All is idea, all is symbol, So the form and the attitude of a human being reveal the emotions of its soul. The body always expresses the spirit whose envelope it is."<sup>1</sup>

When a good sculptor models a torso, he not only represents the muscles, but also the life which animates them. Critics have accused Rodin of being too literal in his inspiration, declaring art as no place for so much philosophic ambition. Rodin retaliated:

"If my modelling is bad, if I make faults in anatomy, if I misinterpret movement, if I am ignorant of the science which animates marble, the critics are right a hundred times. But if my figures are correct and full of life, with what can they reproach me. What right have they to forbid me to add meaning to form."<sup>2</sup>

The *Walking Man* (1877) Fig. 10, similar to *St. John the Baptist* in proportions and pose, was Rodin's first example of his taste for the unfinished. There was no head, no arms. By mutilating the figure, he demonstrated the expressive nature of the body alone, establishing his authority over what had until then been intangible. Jacques Lipchitz explains how this idea influenced the Cubists:

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<sup>1</sup>Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>ibid. p. 68.





"What Rodin did instinctively was not so different from what we the Cubists did in a more intellectual way . . . he was more advanced than we".<sup>3</sup>

On examining Rodin's *Meditation* (1883-1884) Fig. 11, the symbolism in this woman expresses the emblem of human intelligence, assailed by problems that it cannot solve, haunted by an ideal that it cannot realise, obsessed by the infinite which it can never grasp.<sup>4</sup> Rodin deliberately left this cast incomplete. The young woman at first seems as if she sleeps, with her head bent low and her lips and eyes closed. However the torment and anguish of the writhing body and face betray the conflict of her spirit. This is so impressive and strongly conceived that one is moved by the gripping gesture. Rodin must have considered the arms too facile a solution. They seem to be insignificant, something that does not belong to that body. So nothing necessary is lacking, all is complete. One stands before it as before something whole.

In another version of *Meditation* from the same year, Rodin showed the figure with her head and neck still expressively inclined to one side, under the pressure of an invisible weight. He also introduced a new symbolic gesture - the fingers of the left hand pressing the breast Fig. 12. This gesture recalls one traditionally associated with inspiration (the muse squeezing milk onto books or musical instruments seen

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<sup>3</sup> Albert E. Elsen, Rodin p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell p. 68.







Fig 11. Meditation (1883-84 ).







Fig. 12      Meditation with Hand on Breast 1883-84



in Renaissance and Baroque Paintings).<sup>5</sup> Rodin however, was probably more attracted to it as a natural and intuitive symbol for uncertain fertility.<sup>6</sup>

The deeper meaning that Rodin intended for the figure becomes more apparent in the light of his 1880 figure of *Adam*, which was also entitled *Creation*. In the Musée du Luxembourg, one can find the cast of a head of a woman entitled *Pensée* (1886) Fig. 13. Her features are subtle and delicate. Her head is bent but her neck and even her chin are still held in the heavy, massive block of marble from which they cannot get free. The symbolism is of thought, but she vainly endeavours to escape from the heavy shackles of reality.

The terrible inner conflict expressed in the attitude and the features of Ugolino - cannot possibly leave the spectator unmoved, even without knowing the stanzas of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the sculptor captures this conflict. Ugolino della Gherardesca was imprisoned along with his two sons and two grand daughters in February 1289, in a tower not far from Pisa, and left there to starve to death. In 1862, Carpeaux had exhibited this subject, but what Carpeaux omitted, Rodin included to make his group even more moving and beastly, even pathetic. In Carpeaux's depiction, Ugolino, tortured by madness, hunger and sorrow at the sight of his dying children, gnaws his two fists.

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<sup>5</sup> Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin Rediscovered*, Rosalyn Frankel Jamison's essay: *Rodin's Humanization of the Muse*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Elsen "In *Rodin's Studio*, page 167, suggests the associations of this hand-to-breast gesture with birth, desire for a child, or grieving over the loss of one. He makes these observations in connection with another figure exhibiting the same gesture, *The Crouching Woman* (1880 -1881).







Fig 13. La Pensée (1886).



"I gnawed at both my hands for misery and they, who thought it was for hunger plain and simple, rose at once and said to me: 'O Father, it will give us much less pain if thou wilt feed on us . . . ' "7

In the Musée du Louvre, Paris, a drawing by Carpeaux depicts a father crawling amongst his dead children. It is not known whether or not Rodin had knowledge of this sketch, although this is not important, because the drama that Rodin creates cannot but move the spectator, when one sees the terrible inner conflict, expressed in the attitude and features of the majestic figure as his children lie underneath him, dead on the ground Fig. 14.

The pangs of hunger have changed him into a beast as he drags himself on his hands and knees over their flesh. However at the same time he turns his head away and the battle between the beast seeking food to kill his hunger and the loving father, the human being, who sees the horror of this torturing sacrifice is under way.

When discussing beauty in Art with Paul Gsell, Rodin insists that it is character that gives beauty to art, because character doesn't lie. The drama of Ugolino has character and it is that which attracts the spectator:

"Character is the essential truth of any natural object, whether ugly or beautiful, it is even what one might call a double truth, for it is the inner truth translated by the outer truth; it is the soul, the feelings, the ideas,

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<sup>7</sup> Passage taken from Dantes Inferno, taken from the Penguin edition of The Divine Comedy, Dorothy L. Sayers. trans. 1949.







Fig 14. The Drama of Ugolino (1882).



expressed by the features of a face, by the gestures and actions of a human being, by the tones of a sky, by the lines of a horizon."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rodin on Art and Artists, Conversations with Paul Gsell, p. 20.





## CHAPTER FOUR

### Physical Form Governed by Psychological Processes

"Movement per se reflects personality"<sup>1</sup>

Trudie Schoop, a pioneer dance therapist, wrote in 1971: "Where a psychoanalysis brings change in the mental attitude, there should be a corresponding change in physical behaviour."<sup>2</sup> After all, we live in, with and through bodily means. In 1967, Sandler and Joffe suggested that, "Primitive modes of functioning do not disappear, but stay active in the present, under the cover of more complex adaptive behaviour"<sup>3</sup> This as well as Schilder's (1950) hypothesis that every sensation has its mobility<sup>4</sup> gives credence to the widely held, but as yet only empirically substantiated view of primary dance-movement therapy, that there is a body memory i.e. that all experiences are stored in the body and specifically in the muscle systems and are recoverable under appropriate circumstances. In Michael Eigen's essay, *Expression and Meaning*,<sup>5</sup> he argues that human expression is at the heart to of human perception.

Rodin, along with his contemporary, the glass sculptor, designer and artist, Emile Gallé, absorbed certain ideas from neuropsychiatry.<sup>6</sup> They both injected into their art forms, an appreciation and knowledge of the interior of the human organism as

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Robbins, *Expressive Therapy*, Elaine v Siegal D.T.R; Essay: Integrating movement and psycholanalytic technique, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin de-Siècle France*, p. 245.

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a sensitive nervous mechanism. There are three suggestable reasons for the neuropsychiatric qualities of Rodin's art works: his personal interest in medical neurology and osteology, the writings of his close friend, the symbolist poet Maurice Rolinat; and the critics who characterised his innovations in psychiatric terms.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1883, a committee in Nancy had selected Rodin's proposal for his large sculpture *The Monument to Claude Lorrain*. Rodin chose to represent Claude not in a calm, frontal pose, but engaged in the act of creation, precariously poised in the inspirational moment before applying brush to canvas. This state of inspiration found its physical embodiment in the awkward bending and swerving of the legs, in taut immobility. If Rodin's goal had been only physical realism, he would have portrayed Claude Lorrain's physical likeness. Instead he achieved psychological realism when he subordinated his observations of Claude's physical appearance to his psychological state - his "genius", his "thought" and his "soul", the building blocks of his creative inspiration. Rodin's conception of the correspondence between internal activity and external tension was due to Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot of the Paris Salpêtrière. During Charcot's term as teacher, Rodin visited him at the Ecole de Médecine. It was here he studied osteology, myology and neurology. According to Judith Cladel - Rodin's first biographer - his knowledge of medical anatomy injected his sculpture with the ability of being able to reproduce on the surface of the figure the elements of its interior structure.<sup>8</sup>

Rodin represented Claude Lorrain as deeply absorbed in the process of creation. His raised head is tilted away from the spectator, studying the sunlight and a scene in the distance. His mouth is open, Fig. 15. The inspired painter stands on a

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 253.







Fig 15. The Monument to Claude Lorrain ( began 1883).





Fig 16. Portrait of Emile Gallé by Victor Prouvé.







heavy stone pedestal, not of columns or figurines, which was the norm. Rodin's is an active, animated allegory of Apollo driving the chariot of the sun. Apollo is in the centre, his arm raised, his two horses galloping forward, as if trying to escape the stone. The taut immobility of Claude Lorrain contrasts vividly with the active and furious energies of the pedestal. Yet both parts are asymmetrical. In explaining his intentions, Rodin explicitly relates his Claude Monument to the current rococo revival and to the existing ensemble of rococo design in Nancy.

Victor Prouvé embraced Rodin's *Claude Lorrain* as an image of physical form governed by psychological processes.<sup>9</sup> He also viewed the movement and contortion of this monument as "the external signs of the internal vibrations of the nervous system, whose activities were intensified during artistic creation." Prouvé characterised Rodin's work as visualising a state of tension in immobility. According to Prouvé, even when beings were stationary, the mind was still working relentlessly. At the time of his commentary on Rodin's *Claude Lorrain*, Prouvé was preparing to paint a portrait of Emile Gallé. In his portrait, he depicted Gallé in a physical and psychological state similar to that of Rodin's *Claude Lorrain* Fig. 16. Both are caught in the process of artistic creation, both turned away from the spectator, their gazes absorbed, intense, fixed.

For Rodin, *the Monument to Claude Lorrain*, was a representation of artistic creativity. In 1892, *The Gates of Hell* shared the same creative processes, this time literary creation. In 1889, when Rodin exhibited studies for *The Gates of Hell*, at the Exposition in Paris, the composition was now radically altered from the original proposal. The two main groups on either side of the portals, the lovers, Francesca and Paolo on the right and Ugolino on the left, had lost their

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 253.





Fig 17. The Thinker (1880).





recognisable outlines and were now fused into a turbulent mass of writhing, half-formed bodies. The figure on the tympanum changed also. Originally, the figure was to represent Dante in the centre, overlooking the portals, surveying the objects of his literary creation. This figure was renamed *The Thinker*", "*The Poet*". Strained immobility marks the physical pose of *The Thinker* Fig. 17. Tension and imbalance are created by the cross-over gesture of his right elbow on his left knee. The physical appearance of *The Thinker's* body reveals on its surface internal agitation and activity. Many of the writers who celebrated Rodin's *Gates of Hell* emphasised the psychological attributes of *The Thinker*. As the columnist d'Auray stated: "The artist, the poet, the creator is crouching, head in hands, pressing his brain to the limit, all of his being is gathered in an attitude of meditation and of dreaming."<sup>11</sup>

Gustav Geffroy also suggested that *The Thinker* represents the suffering peculiar to fin de - siècle psychological man. The seated poet in thought is "a man of action at rest".<sup>12</sup> The poet Rilke reinforced d'Auray's suggestions when he remarked that "The Thinker's entire physical being was driven by the force of thought".<sup>13</sup>

*The Thinker* has similar qualities to those of Claude Lorrain in physical features and inner state of mind. *The Thinker* represents the process of thought; *Claude Lorrain* the process of contemplation and inspiration in a moment preceding action. Rodin's *Thinker* is inactive, but not at rest, while *Claude Lorrain*, though immobile is anxious and taut. Both are absorbed and riveted by an idea. In each case, concentration and inspiration are marked by physical strain and tension. As Rodin explained, what makes his "Thinker think, is that he thinks not only with his brain,

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 258.



with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils, and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes".<sup>14</sup>

"For Rodin a being is never inert, but is passion ridden, full of dreams and motion, racked by neurosis. Shrivelled muscles swell and ripple and the observing eye follows this shuddering flesh from its energised contractions to its ample slackness."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 261, Rodin quoted in Tanlock, sculpture of Auguste Rodin pp. 112, 111.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 261, Victor Prouvé quoted in Rey, "La Statue de Claude Gelée, pp 47-478.

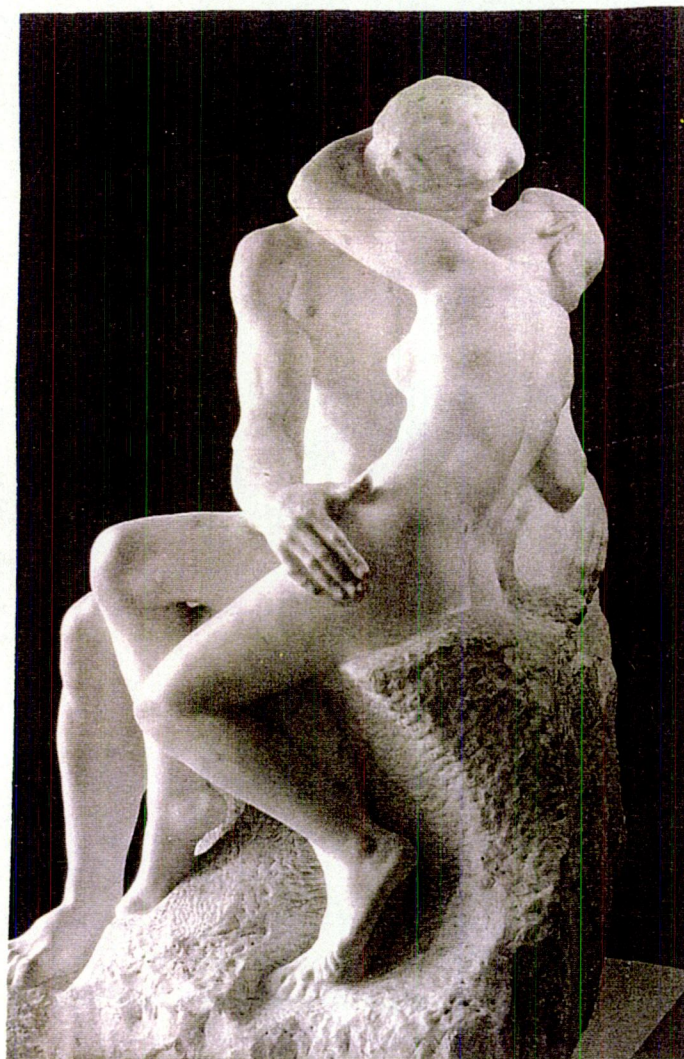


Fig 18. The Kiss ( began 1880-1, first version shown 1886).





## CHAPTER FIVE

### Women and Dance

Rodin said some people considered he thought too much of women, and his reply: "What is there more important to think about?"<sup>1</sup>

The years between 1883 and 1892 were without doubt, Rodin's most prolific, why? The answer has to lie in his passionate affair with the beautiful young sculptress Camille Claudel, which took place during these years. His work portrayed sexual passion, hidden behind legend and mythology. Not only were they sexually and romantically involved, but also intellectually. *The Kiss* Fig. 18 (began in 1880/81 but first version was not shown until 1886), and *External Idol* (1889) Fig. 19 were results of his passionate affair with Camille. His erotic feelings were portrayed in the many female figures, often just fragments, incomplete without arms, a head or legs, but powerfully modelled, as one can see in *Iris messagère des dieux* (1890) Fig. 20, with its daring pose.

Rodin never stopped loving Camille, but after their final break in 1895, she withdrew from society over the following 18 years, and in 1913, at her family's request, was sent to a lunatic asylum, where she remained until her death in 1943.

Rodin had many liaisons, notably with the duchesse de Choiseul, but he always returned to his loyal Rose Beuret, who stood by him for 53 years and with whom he had a son, Auguste, whom he never legitimised. Rose looked after his masterpieces, preventing them from drying out. He finally married her on 29 of January 1917, two weeks before she died and followed her to the grave in

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<sup>1</sup> Video: Rodin-Modern Art: Practices and Debates, narrated and produced by Leslie Megahey.



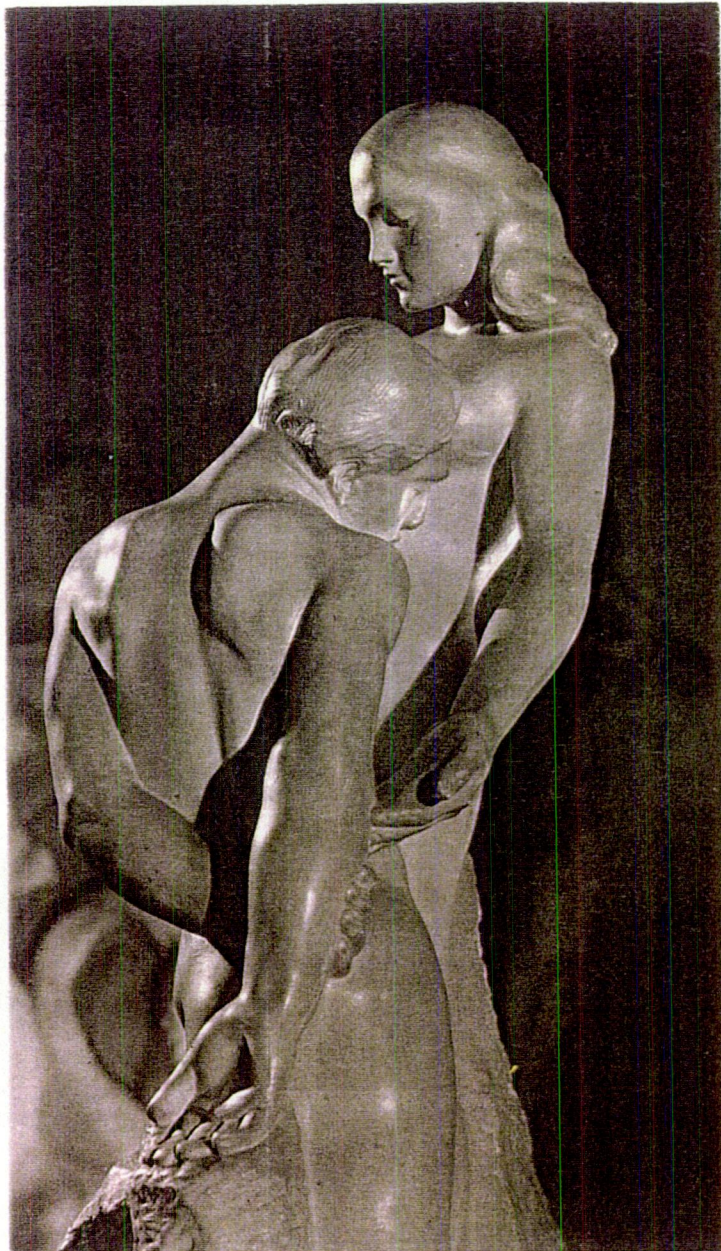


Fig 19. The External Idol ( 1889).







Fig 20. Iris, Messagère des dieux (1890).



November of the same year. They are both buried in their garden beneath a bronze statue of *The Thinker*.

Rodin admired the beauty and graceful shapes of women and celebrated in them the whole cycle of life: the child-woman in his *Vénus à sa toilette* (1885) Fig. 21, the young woman in his *Torse de Centaurese* (1884) Fig. 22, the woman stretched with desire in the *Torse d'Adèle* (1882) Fig. 23, the fulfilled woman in *La Danaïde* (1885), Fig. 24, and finally the old women in *Celle qui fut la belle Heaulmière* (1880-3) Fig. 25.

Motherhood, too, took its place in his relentless portrayals of women. In 1869, Rose seems to have posed with their young son, for a mother and child sculpture, which was impregnated with the gracious and charming 18th century style of Clodion, a style Rodin was particularly fond of at the time. By 1885, Rodin had long since changed his style, when he portrayed the young mother with her child on her knees, intended for *The Gates of Hell*. This maternity scene was no doubt connected with Camile's presence.

Two other woman whom Rodin greatly admired were Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller, whose dancing fascinated him. In 1889, the music hall, the Moulin Rouge opened. Along with Rodin, painters like Toulouse-Lautrec were hypnotised by the wild, joyful dancing. Neither artist was interested in the complicated and sophisticated steps of classical dancing. Degas, on the other hand preferred the poses of classically trained ballet. Degas was a frequent visitor to the Villa des Brillants in Meudon, where Rodin moved to in 1897. Both Rodin and Degas passionately searched for movement in their art. Degas like Rodin, refused to let his models take conventional Salon poses. Rodin, however sought from his models unpredictable, impulsive, spontaneous, and unusual movements in comparison to Degas, who firmly fixed his models in habitual poses. Rodin's models were







Fig 21. Vénus à sa toilette (1885).







Fig 22. Torse de Centauresse (1884).





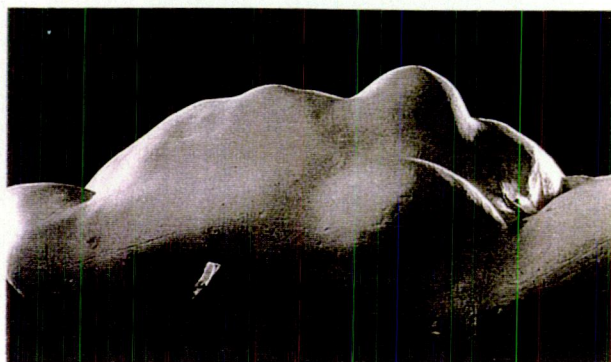
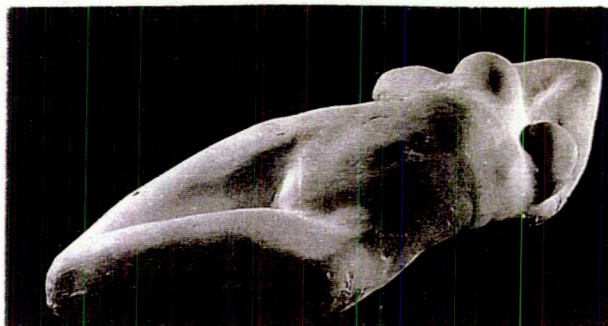


Fig 23. Torse d'Adèle (1882).





Fig 24. La Danaïde (1885).







Fig 25. Celle qui fut la belle Heaulmière (1880-83).



instructed to move freely giving uninhibited expressions of every whim or emotion, as in modern dance Fig. 27. Degas' models poses were dictated by their professional training, such as in classical ballet Fig. 26, or by their daily rituals, like washing the body or hair, or unfastening clothes. These representations, allowed for no display of character or emotion.<sup>2</sup> There was nothing acrobatic in the figures, for it was the bodily presence of the dancer rather than the speed of motion and the lithe agility of dance which interested him.<sup>3</sup>

For Rodin, the mind dominates the body, whereas in Degas' nudes, there is no question of the mind operating independently of, or in conflict with the rest of the body. Degas also showed a marked preference for a limited number of poses. In 1910, for instance, he started a statuette for which the model stood on her left leg, her right foot held high behind her with her right hand. Ten years earlier, Degas had modelled a statuette showing exactly the same attitude.<sup>4</sup>

In 1906, Rodin discovered the Cambodian dancers. They were accompanying the King of Cambodia on an official visit to the Colonial Exhibition at Marseilles. Rodin saw them performing at the Pré-Catelan in Paris and was dazzled. Their small supple bodies were able to bend to every demand, their agile movements gave him poses inconceivable to his usual models Fig. 28.

In 1908, Rodin rented a room in the Hôtel Biron, one of the most majestic mansions in Paris. Some of the other tenants were the young painter Henri Matisse, Isodara Duncan and Jean Cocteau. Duncan's pupils danced wildly in the gardens of the Hôtel Biron. Rodin was in Heaven: bodies in movement all around

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<sup>2</sup> Albert E. Elsen, Rodin p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> The Arts Council. The Sculptures of Degas p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> John Rewald, Degas Sculpture, the Complete Works p. 23.







Fig 26. Degas' dancers.



Fig 27 . Rodin's Three dance movements (1911).



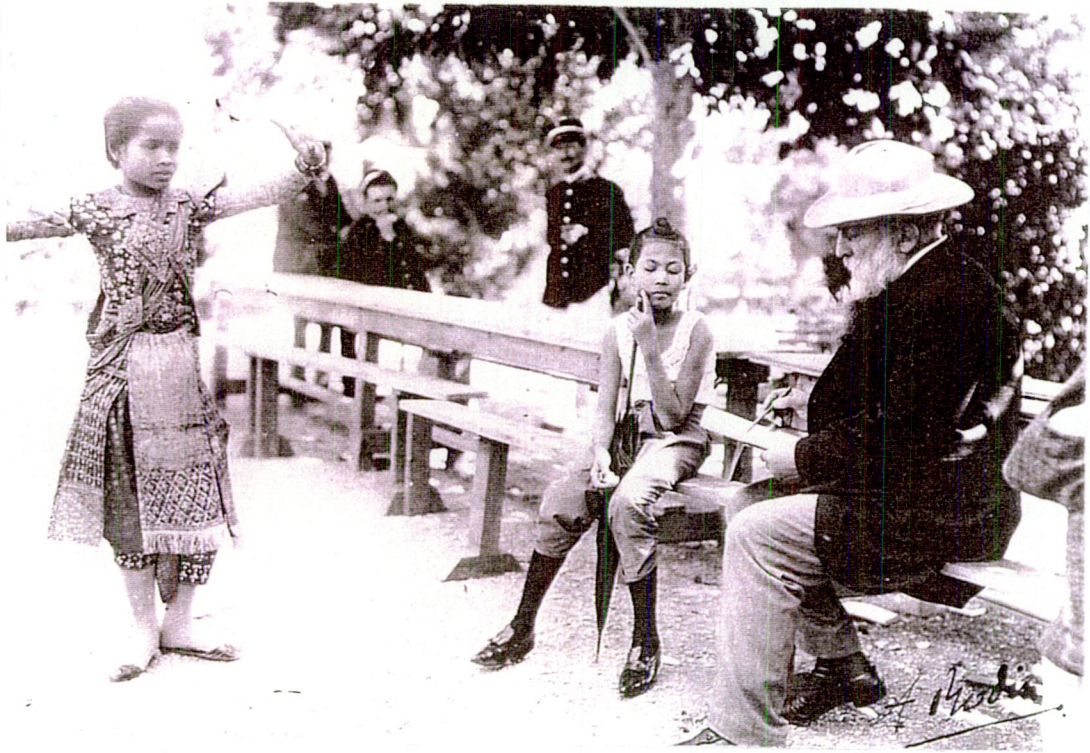


Fig 28. Rodin with the Cambodian Dancers in Marseille , july 1906.





him, for him to study. Isadora Duncan was another woman who almost succumbed to his energetic and compelling power. As she danced for him, he simply stared, engrossed in her whole body and its spontaneity as if it were an object in movement Fig. 29, to such an extent that some saw him as a lecher, even butcher, mutilating his figures into fragments. He was notorious for the contortions into which he forced the body. One of his accusers was the poet Paul Claudel, who blamed Rodin for his sister Camille's madness.

Rodin's *Nijinsky* (1912) Fig. 30, is impressive, despite its modest scale, due to the passionate attention given to the human body in spontaneous movements. The challenge for Rodin was, to capture the energy of a body as it gathered itself to clear into space. It became associated with Rodin's almost finding himself in a public controversy. Nijinsky was a dancer in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and when Diaghilev allowed him to adapt the choreography of *Fokine's L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* Fig. 31, to new steps, which were to become the basis for modern dance. Violent criticism of his performance of May 1912 was aroused, especially by Calmette in *Le Figaro*, who claimed it to be "bestial" and "unseemly".

"We have seen an indecent faun, with ugly movements of a bestial eroticism and heavily obscene gestures".<sup>5</sup>

Rodin expressed his enthusiasm to Roger Marx on the perfect harmony between the mime, grace and quality of Nijinsky's bodily expression, which Marx then quoted in defence of Nijinsky.

"In dancing, as in painting and sculpture, progress has been impeded by routine rather than prejudice, by laziness and inability to renew."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Monique Laurent, Rodin p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*





Fig 29. Isadora Duncan.







Fig 30. Rodin's Nijinsky (1912).





Fig 31. Nijinsky in L'Après-midi d'un Faune .





## CONCLUSION

Rodin has been described as the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo and the father of modern sculpture. His work shows a depth and range that reflect his vitality, energy and innovative approach. Rodin's work exhibits such controlled force and power that they are not of a kind. They are those of a faithful regard for natural appearance, so true to nature that the sculptor was wronged by the accusation of having taken a cast from a live model in his *Age of Bronze* (1877).

There are figures of a sentimental nature, with a surface as smooth as silk or marble; *The Kiss* (begun in 1880-1, first version seen in 1886), but there are also sculptures where a latent energy and tension seem to burst their outer shell, and where the impressionist play of light and shade on a craggy surface is not an end in itself, but a means to intensify emotional impact :*The Burghers of Calais* (1884-86).

Literal interpretation might call incomplete a figure which Rodin considered finished: his *Walking Man* (1877), has all the punch and vigour in the modelling of trunk and legs which a completed figure could imply. An arm, a leg, may be missing, or a hand be modelled like a heavy lump: his 1911 *Three Dance Movements*, yet movement and the spiritual force behind the physical force, are expressed to perfection. What now seems heroic and contemporary about Rodin is not only his vision of the pathetic victim-hero, who reacts rather than acts, nor his passion for the act of making rather than completing sculpture, but his struggle to portray the emotional and psychological complexity of living human beings. Rodin achieved in his sculpture the psychology of movement.



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