

Rodin's Celebration of

the Female Nude



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1987, Rodin's exhibition which was held in the Hayward Gallery, had an adverse reaction from the feminist movement. In this thesis, I will try to analyse and explore his use of the nude form, in an attempt to try to portray through these works that perhaps Rodin expressed a more genuine appreciation for the female body than most of his contemporaries. I have decided to concentrate on his later drawings (1890-1917) as he produced an astonishing quantity of nude drawings during this period.

Rodin was not only acknowledged as a gifted modeller but also as a superb draftsman of the figure particularly when it came to capturing the naked human form in its ever changing moods and movements. Rodin himself acknowledged that it was only after his journey to Italy that he perceived much more than the human body and that it took even longer before this became apparent in his work. After his journey through Italy at the age of thirty-five, he returned to Belgium where he executed a quantity of sketches, imposing on his models Michaelan-gelesque poses. Drawing was important to Rodin. Rodin's success as a sculptor has diverted the attention of the public from his gifts as a draftsman, something which in his own lifetime the artist took great pains to avoid.

I have chosen to write about Rodin with particular emphasis on his later drawings because he was preoccupied with the representation of the female nude almost to the exclusion of all else in his later years. However, this can not be achieved without a brief exploration of his environment, his life and thus his departure into this later mode of drawing. As Henri Fuseli said "All depends on the char-



acter of the time in which the artist lives, and on the motive of his exertions."<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note the general attitude to the female and in particular to the artists model, and the general moral codes at the time, to achieve a better understanding of the female nude.

Rodin's trip to Italy might be seen as one of the major events in his life as well as in modern art. When he left he was an obscure thirty-five year old decorator but on return he went on to his first Salon success with 1877 Age of Bronze, and then to dominate European Sculpture in the 1880's and for the rest of his life. Rodin admits that "My liberation from academicism was via Michaelangelo. He is the bridge by which I passed from one circle to another."<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Rodin's early drawings lies mostly in their use as preliminaries for his sculpture. But they are also important in that they show us the foundations of his development as an artist and all of his drawings document a long life search for an expressive gesture. Thematically, Rodin's drawings are concerned with the way men and women express themselves through the language of their bodies. But they also tell us that for him "the sight of human forms feeds and comforts me. I have infinite worship for the nude."<sup>3</sup>

Rodin took many years to consider his drawings as important and complete works of art and I hope to show that because of this, coupled with his 'worship' and respect for the nude, he brings about a sexual candour in his work as opposed to eroticism. His respect for the female is also evident in his choice of model/companions in that they tended to be strong individual characters surviving in a male dominated society. This is portrayed in many of the portraits he has executed of such women.

The majority of other artists' painting in the nineteenth



century depicted the female nude as a sexual object of desire, posing seductively at the spectator- in other words presuming that the spectator is male. By exploring examples of this I hope to conclude that these artists are portraying the nude as specifically erotic in comparison to the gestural movements of Rodin's females. Gauguin's female breasts nestle among fruit, suggesting oral eroticism, Ingre's languid painting of the desirable waiting 'Odalisque' reclining as the object of the erotic gaze; these and other evocative portrayals of the naked body are far removed from the free flowing expressions of human thought and emotion in Rodin's drawings. Visual depictions of a nude body are never thoroughly devoid of sexual associations but it is the artists interpretation, the appliance of his understanding as well as his depiction of posture that is of primary importance. This underlying scheme of Rodin's work, his approach to the nudity of women on which I will try to base this essay, will help us perceive much more than the erotic naked female. I hope to show that his images go even further and demystify and tell the truth about his slice of the objective world.

"When you follow nature, you find everything.... It is not a matter of creating 'The New'; the words creating and inventing are superfluous words. Revelation comes only to those who perceive with their eyes and minds. Everything is contained in what surrounds. Everything is given in nature, which is imbued with eternal, uninterrupted movement. A woman's body. a mountain. a horse, are one and the same thing in terms of conception, and they are built according to the same principles."



FOOTNOTES

1. The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, London, 1831.
2. Rodin quoted by T.H. Bartlett in Albert Elsen, Auguste Rodin, Reading on His Life and Work.
3. Albert Elsen, Auguste Rodin, Reading on His Life and Work.
4. Rodin quoted from the chapter 'The idea behind my work' in Elsen and Varnedoe, The Drawings of Rodin.



CHAPTER 1

If we look at the way the nude is shown in medieval and early renaissance art, one cannot fail to be aware of the huge unease which long possessed artists when they had to grapple with such serious subject matter. The power of the religious tabu tended to make the human body as fascinating as it was threatening. While for the Greeks it was an emblem of man's separateness from and dominance over surrounding nature, but also of his unity with it as a beautiful animal. For medieval and post medieval men the nude suggests not only dark uncontrollable forces within man, but physical vulnerability.

Few things are more complex than our reaction to the naked or semi-naked human body when these reactions are as Edward Lucie-Smith writes "When these reactions are translated into the further complexities of art, the result is often work which has layer on layer of meaning-aesthetic, cultural and psychological. Faced with some of the many masterpieces of western art which make the naked body, male and female, their chief subject, it is a bold researcher who can claim to have reached bedrock- the ultimate and unalterable meaning." <sup>1</sup>

The female body has occupied a central place in the western culture for centuries. The sixteenth century secularised society and therefore secularised art. But this did not set the artist entirely at liberty. He was allowed to produce work which was overtly erotic but the stimulation which he offered was guided by class and also by contest. The higher up the social scale a man was, the likelier he was to have free access to libertine imagery. Patronage of art and its sexual rewards were privileges of power. Members of the elite were free to enjoy things which were forbidden to common men and indeed the freedom to do



so was one of the marks of their status. Phillip II of Spain, whose religious conscience was notoriously uneasy took great satisfaction in the opulent nudes which Titian created for him. Titian was one of the first painters of the female nude in the western tradition and although he was a great painter of the period with supreme mastery of colour, he treated the human form in a seductive, sensuous manner.

Although a great painter of the period and a magnificent artist, Vasari says with reference to Titian, whose style is too naturalistic for his taste - "He who has not drawn much nor studied the choicest ancient and modern works can not improve the things that he copies from life, giving them grace and perfection in which art goes beyond the scope of nature."<sup>2</sup>

When we talk of erotic art we talk of that which was made erotic for men and the imagery that was depicted, whether it be buttocks, breast, or corset, it was created about women for man's enjoyment. Women in the nineteenth century were forbidden to draw the nude model, and as nude at that time was nearly always the painters central theme, women artists could not participate. They therefore were no threat or competition to the male artist. In fact, it wasn't until the 1880's and 1890's in France that the 'Union des Femme Peintres et Sculptuers' was founded to promote the interest of women artists and support their demands for access to education and exhibition. Over a twenty year period the union fought for and gradually won the rights to academic training at the Ecole de Beaux Arts and finally in 1903, the right for women to enter the competition for the 'Prix de Rome', the height of an academic artists aspirations. Such an entry into the art establishment and the right to be treated on an equal basis with male art students was important for the professional recognition of women as artists, even though academic honours



Plate 1.





were scorned by the avant-garde. Sources such as the painter Marie Bashkentseffs diaries first published in 1885, emphasize the conflict between middle class femininity and the paradigm of artistic life. The respectability afforded by academic training did enable women to study the nude without loss of social position. At that time the society of 1890 found sex a subject of almost overwhelming interest, and one should note that it was only now that sexual behaviour was subject to scientific study, a process of investigation and analysis which culminates in the publication of Sigmund Frued's earliest psychoanalytic papers. ( These are events which undoubtedly had some influence on artists at the time, including Rodin). There was a strong objection to the blatant portrayals of women as sexual objects in Paris in the latter part of the nineteenth century and by a brief exploration of those trends of thought we can understand more fully the environment in which Rodin was working.

Prostitution in Paris, at the time of Rodin, was regulated by a system called simply reglementation. The organisation and control of this system was in the hands of a special division of the city police. Prostitutuion was not legitimized or controlled by any laws but 'reglementation' was acknowledged and followed on the whole. Rather than trying to eliminate prostitution the regulations accepted it as an inevitable evil, and tried to confine it and control its visibility. Th s they tried to prevent any threat to public order, public morality and public health. However, there was a growing worry of a breakdown in the system due to the fact that there seemed to be more unregistered prostitutes than registered. This was more than a bureaucratic worry but rather a worry about society's discovery of pleasure in extra-conjugal sex, and in particular the spread of middle class female adultery. It was in this context that 'Rolla' (now in the Musee des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux) was submitted to the



Salon of 1878 by the twenty four year old Henri Gervex, and the canvas was removed at the last moment for reasons of 'inconvenience'- moral impropriety. Yet a painting of a similar subject 'Waiting for the Client' (circa 1879) by Edgar Degas, was publically acclaimed. The answer, as perhaps with Rodin's drawings, lies more than in the erotic pose of the model, but rather the artists interpretation of the subject. Gervex depicts a carefully erotically posed female which openly invites the spectator to speculate in sexual fantasies, while Degas' rendering of the prostitute is one of objectivity, detachment and moral indifference. In comparison, Degas has shown us a working class woman as opposed to a woman of leisure. I would go even further to say he demystifies women in her extreme capacity as a sexual object. So who were these women in these paintings, and how did they get to work for the artists? In the 1880's the suburb of Montmatre was becoming a favoured area for artists looking for cheap studio space and picturesque surroundings. Women in search of work stood in the Place Pigalle waiting to be viewed and picked out by artists in search of models. The parallels with prostitution are clear, a model also offered her body for sale. She was usually of lower class origin and dependent upon her middle class 'client'. Her rates of pay were low and established by individual negotiation. Even if a model led a blameless life, she was clearly defined outside the code of respectable femininity. The fact that they were paid means models became objects to be used as the buyer wished. Since speech might interrupt their pose and the artist concentration, they usually did not communicate. It must have been surprising even shocking when Courbet revealed his painting 'The Painters Studio' in 1855, in which the model appears active. Courbet marks the new models introduction as she stands looking over the artists shoulder at the work he is doing. She is seen outside her normal role



Plate 2.

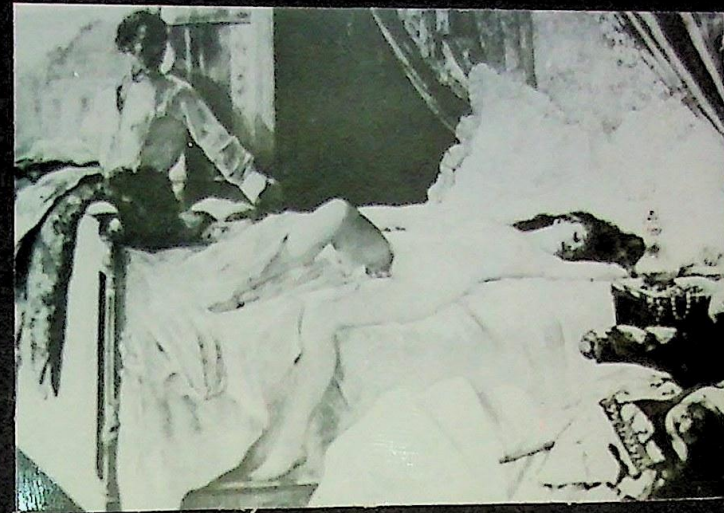


Plate 3.



and although her nakedness makes her profession explicit, she is not practising it. She must be one of the earliest models in art not being looked at by the characters in the painting but doing the looking herself.

Rodin has made use of the lesbian theme in his later drawings, but unlike Courbet's scandalous 'Sleep' painting we know that it was not painted for and about women- men were considered to be the audience. It was in fact painted for the former Turkish ambassador, Khalil Bey, with lesbian overtones apparently much enjoyed by men and one which turns up frequently in the high literature of the period as well.

Degas was another 'classical' painter of the female body in the nineteenth century, preoccupied with its representation almost to the exclusion of all else. He depicted women in their various domestic roles, almost reveling in their mundane lower class activities. But his paintings suggests to us that he is only interested in showing us the human form merely as a kind of animal. As if he is recording the events like a photographer- at a distance. In C. Armstrong's essay on Degas, she quotes Valery's view of his nudes "All his life Degas sought in the nude, observed from all sides, in an unbelievable quantity of poses....the unique system of lines that would formulate any given movement of the body with the utmost precision and the utmost generality." But again according to Valery, Degas' nudes were of a structural, systematic nature, grounded in the study and formulation of the body's movements and hence of its dematerialization into motion and design, it seemed to be both anti-erotic and genderless, or at least androgynous. In the painting 'The Tub' by Degas, it is considered voyeuristic- even the artist himself tells us that he wished to see and depict the nude as if through a keyhole. There is no doubt the viewer or the persons looking through the keyhole is male



Plate 4.







Plate 5.

1. Thomas Gainsborough. The Body Image of the Nude.
2. Vincent van Gogh. Nude, Reclining on a Sofa.
3. Alfred Wallis. Nude, Reclining on a Sofa.
4. Nude, seated by T.J. Eastman. In Alfred Wallis. Nude, Reclining on a Sofa.
5. Nude, seated by T.J. Eastman.



and it is the male viewer, not the female body, whose position is made deeply problematic in Degas' nudes.

Like Degas, Rodin was a draftsman, but a more passionate reporter who could be touched by a models "impressive movements, ravishing attitude, or right gesture which conveys a whole attitude."<sup>3</sup> He found secrets and mystery in drawing and a successful drawing was the result of 'understanding the model.'

It is not surprising that Rodin was most impressed by Michael-angelo and it was Rodin's trips to Italy that showed him just how great a master he was especially of the nude figure. Of the Medici tombs Rodin said that "in looking at the Medici tombs (during his trip to Florence in 1875) I was more profoundly impressed by anything that I have ever seen.... After looking at these figures long and well, I returned to my room at the hotel and began making sketches, to test the depth of my own capacity of composition and of the impression I had received."<sup>4</sup> On this trip he made scores of drawings and it is these sketchbook pages that provide one of our most inclusive vision of Rodin's experience with Italian art. A deeply felt experience called not for immediate mimicry, but digestion, concentration and analysis.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Edward Lucie-Smith, The Body-Images of the Nude.
2. Vasari from Anthony Blunt, Artistic Theory in Italy .
3. Albert Elsen, Auguste Rodin, Reading on His Life and Work.
4. Rodin quoted by T.H. Bartlett in Albert Elsen, Auguste Rodin, Reading on His Life and Work.
5. T.H. Bartlett "
6. Rodin quoted by T.H. Bartlett, " .



Plate 6.





CHAPTER 2

The Italian trip had changed Rodin. After years of anonymity he suddenly began to find himself. Yet in these obscure years we know that they were not spent idle, but spent defining through drawing a highly personal style of work. Rodin had filled his albums to bursting point with a repertoire of scenes and especially figures partially copied- long contemplated and relentlessly reshaped into a highly individual style. Copying, we should remember did not have a simple role in Rodin's practice, it was always connected with a search for more personal assimilation of the source. Rodin's dissatisfaction with his copies from Michaelangelo urged him forward, as did his later re-working with the drawings for the initial stages of the Gates of Hell (his homage to Dante). This helped him open himself to the study of the unposed movements of his models, giving rise eventually in the 1890's to the well known pencil and watercolour drawings from the moving model. So the lesson learned from Michaelangelo and the Italian experience waited almost twenty years to realise their full impact on Rodin's graphic work which brought us his later drawing manner. Rodin explained, "Michaelangelo gave me some invaluable perceptions and I copied him in my spirit, in certain of my works before understanding him. Once I understood, I saw that this movement existed in nature and that I had only to avoid losing that in my model... that this movement has something natural, not something I could impose artificially; from that point originated my drawings which came a long time afterwards, however, and in which one will find Michaelangelo again, in such a natural form that one will not suspect it."<sup>1</sup>

It's easy for us to see why in particular Michaelangelo had





Plate 7.



Plate 8.





such an effect on Rodin. He was the most original creator of the human form in the history of western art. In the original series of the Sistine Chapel, we might be tempted to think of them as reassuring images, examples of how the nude could exclude all sexual connotations and become a completely neutral expression of the human figure. He certainly makes a brave effort to show us the spirit and likeness of man. But he could not completely deny his own nature, in these nudes we see anxiety and struggle with power, and the artist simultaneously admits and denies his own homosexual inclinations. It is the struggle to transcend the sexual basis of what he was doing, rather than its complete elimination which makes Michelangelo's male nudes so moving. Many of his contemporaries did not bother to put up a fight. The nudes they painted were erotic without thought.

Rodin's early drawings show us the foundations of his development as an artist, in ways that help us understand him not only as an original creator, but as a man of his time. He worked as a decorator, a 'praticien' - a man who executed commissions for others and it would seem that he would have died as an anonymous decorator were it not for determination to push for self-expression. He should have been accepted at the Ecole des Beaux Arts but didn't. He tried three times and failed. Instead he entered a Special Imperial School of Drawing and Mathematics known as the Petite Ecole. Of that he said, "The Germinal period of my life, where my own nature planned itself without let or hindrance: where the seeds of my subsequent development were sown; and where I received the only instruction of value."<sup>2</sup>

It was here he had an exceptional tutor Horace Lecoq, whose innovative and broadly tolerant instructions Rodin later acknowledges with gratitude. Lecoq's technique for training visual memory, his dis -



affection for the artificiality of study poses and his insistence on individual study of nature were all important to Rodin's formation. The importance of Rodin's early drawings had no other aspect, except as preliminary work for his sculptures. His commercial decorative works were merely playful graceful figures and although these works are artistic, they had not developed the more expressive language of the body. It was Michaelangelo who introduced him to the body as a metaphor for serious and complex states of mind and feeling. His 'black' drawings from the late 1870's and 1880's which (incidentally) are predominantly male, show us that Rodin was beginning to change, he wanted the body to become more expressive rather than beautiful. He could not continue to abide by the refined Rococo style which a lot of artists in France were indulging in. He was no longer interested in the human form as a mindless object, but sought to voice the internal passions and pressures that drove the body. By the 1890's he was drawing exclusively from the model and on the language of the body's natural movement as they were seen in his studio.

"I state quite clearly, I have no ideas; but when I see nature showing me forms, I immediately find something worth saying and even worth developing. Sometimes one believes that there is nothing to be found in a model and then nature suddenly reveals something of herself, a strip of flesh appears, and that scrap of truth reveals the whole truth and allows one leap with one bound to the absolute principle that lies behind things."<sup>3</sup>

In his early drawings, Rodin sought a single direction in ten feverish strokes, his later drawings show a single line with great certainty and succeeds in giving this one all the quivering life of his early drawings. His dark imaginative drawings belonged very much





Plate 9.



to the romantic tradition not only in their theme of suffering and struggle, but also in the imagination of classical form, isolated in deep turbulent darkness.

Mythological themes became gradually less frequent during the course of the 1890's as Rodin increasingly began to observe his models in such mundane activities as combing their hair or dressing. It was what the models did during their breaks which became so rivet-ingly interesting to Rodin. He let his models move freely after explaining the 'plot' of action to them. This may truly be the clue to the beginning of a new approach both with respect to his models and to his sketching style. Rodin's tempestuous and sensual nature inevitably made him a fervent womaniser, yet Rodin's art renders a perpetual homage to woman. She stands at the centre of it and to her he returns constantly. The degree to which the woman intoxicated Rodin comes across in his numerous and daring drawings, although in our age this daring approach doesn't strike us so forcibly as it would have done in his time. Like Isben, he gave woman her rightful place in life, as an equal; and for one contemporary, Madame Aurel, he was the artist of the 'new woman', he was the Homer of the woman's body which 'ceased to be the prey of man, she avows her grandeur and autocracy.' In effect, he does suggest that woman is not the willing creature who submits to man's desires, but rather one with desire of her own. With this in mind, maybe we can begin to understand that in Rodin's drawings he is not trying to depict women as objects. As John Berger might suggest "one might simplify by saying men act and women appear." Men look at women, women watch themselves between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male; the surveyed female, thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision- a sight."<sup>4</sup>



Plate 10.





In Rodin's case his personal view of the woman in these drawings are so strong that it makes no allowances for the spectator. The artist and the woman become inseparable and the spectator is an outsider. She is not naked for the viewer. Rodin includes his models will and her intentions in the very structure of his images and in the very expression of her body and face Rodin says "A woman undressing, what a gorgeous vision. It is like the sun breaking through the clouds. The sight of that holy body comes as a blow, a shock....The whole of nature resides in the body of every model."<sup>5</sup>

It was not only models who posed for Rodin but many people from all walks of life- Duchesses, society people, and artists alike sought to pose for him. He had a notorious attraction to women and they to him, but he seemed especially attracted to women who were strong in character, and who were respected in their own field. Talented women became part of his creative ambience which Rodin liked to surround himself with. His portrait of Caroline Remy ('Severine') captured a face in charcoal so expressively, indeed passionately. The model inspired him to this achievement. (She fought for women's rights- political and social reform under the name 'Severine'). The vehemence of this drawing is astonishing and it reflects not only the model's emotion, but that of the artist as well, as he abandoned himself to the joy of creation. As captivating as 'Severine' herself is the letter she wrote to Rodin in April, 1894. Speaking of her portrait, she affirmed that "others depict my features, but you, you reveal my soul." It seems Rodin adapted his method of graphic means to the personality of each sitter in a truly revealing way.

Gwen John was an important artist of the time who also modeled for Rodin. In Susan Chitty's biography on Gwen, she tells us how



she felt only pleasure in her nudity, because Rodin made her feel completely at ease. He encouraged her to draw and paint and under his 'guidance' her work improved. He spoke about her 'great powers of feeling and thought' and he praised her 'little heart, so patient, so gentle.'<sup>6</sup>

The same could be said of Camille Claudel who became his companion for many years. Rodin shows her more as an equal than a pupil. Octave Mirbeau has said of Camille that she was "clearly a great and wonderful artist...a unique person, one of nature's rebels; a woman of genius." This is reflected in a will Rodin made twenty years after they parted, which specified that a room be dedicated to her sculpture in the Rodin museum which he was to bequeath to the State after his death.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Rodin in a letter to Antoine Bourdelle, cited by E.C. Geissbuhler, Rodin, Later Drawings.
2. T.H. Bartlett in ALbert Elsen, Auguste Rodin Reading on His Life and Work.
3. Paul Gsell, Auguste Rodin.
4. John Berger, 'The Ways of Seeing.'
5. Judith Cladel, Rodin, The Man and His Art.
6. Susan Chitty, Gwen John.



### CHAPTER 3

In the nineteenth century, the most admired type of female was distinguished by a cluster of characteristics which included purity, modesty, and duty and self-sacrifice. A woman naked and unashamed in a studio, not passively suffering her horrible fate and at ease with her role and her surroundings, would have been a difficult image for the nineteenth century viewer to cope with. It was not conventional wisdom to see the model on an equal footing with the artists or the viewer. The artists who elevated the model on to a rung of equality with the artist and who painted and drew her in an active not passive role had much force in an era which felt the model was better out of sight.

Rodin was such an artist- for him the female had ceased to be the passive object of male concupiscence and became a sensual being who shared in all the transports of sensual pleasure. Even more than his sculptures, Rodin's drawings show that he delighted in picturing the throes and convulsions of physical ecstasy. He encouraged his models to relax, stretch and sprawl - to pull up their legs or spread them, because to him these movements were just as natural as, say a child's kicking and playing with himself or a cat licking itself clean. Rodin loved the natural innocence of such attitudes and they distinguish his nudes from those of artist like Ingre, the nineteenth century artist, who was also involved with painting the female nude.

Ingre's depiction of the female could be considered erotic like Rodin but if we examine his portrayal of the nude, his paintings invite an imagined encounter between the image and the viewer. In 'Odalisque with a Slave', we see a reclining frontal nude, her arms are thrown over her head, exposing her breast and the swing of the hip and



knee suggesting her sexual availability. 'Odalisque' is an object of the gaze; she is there to be viewed by the male spectator and her pose emphasises her willingness to obey. It has already been suggested that there are four senses explicitly symbolized in this painting which lends to this erotic display. The Hookah, with its mouthpiece coiled invitingly toward the spectator represents taste; the smoking censer, smell; the multi-jetted fountain symbolizes hearing; the fingered string of the musical instrument, the sense of touch; and sense of sight symbolized by curious helmet in the lower left corner. Even the treatment of the body itself painted as smooth, fleshy and boneless, reinforces the passivity and langour of the pose. The picture as a whole suggests that the woman in the image is literally possessed by the man who looks at her. Why does it suggest to us that the viewer be masculine? Could a woman not behold this spectacle and enjoy it in the same manner? Lucie Irigaray claims that "the kind of look which separates the subject from the object of the gaze and projects desire on the object is essentially masculine. Female eroticism is bound up with touch, much more than sight, women's pleasure being autoerotic." This, she argues, means that women have a problematic relationship with the whole process of looking in the western culture. Women are bound within visual discourse to become objects and never subject of their own desire. "Since distance is an absolute condition of viewing and women's pleasure is autoerotic, any pleasure women have in the visual image is vacarious and even masochistic."<sup>1</sup>

In Ingre's 'Le Bain Turc' we see nudes everywhere we look, twenty five of them in all. They amuse themselves by pretty diversions, against the back wall of the bath a frieze of figures is divided into three groups; at the left bathers sway and dance to the rhythm of the tamborine; in the centre, food and drink are being consumed; to the right



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In Ingre's 'Le Bain Turc' we see nudes everywhere we look, twenty five of them in all. They amuse themselves by pretty diversions, against the back wall of the bath a frieze of figures is divided into three groups; at the left bathers sway and dance to the rhythm of the tamborine; in the centre, food and drink are being consumed; to the right



Plate 11.

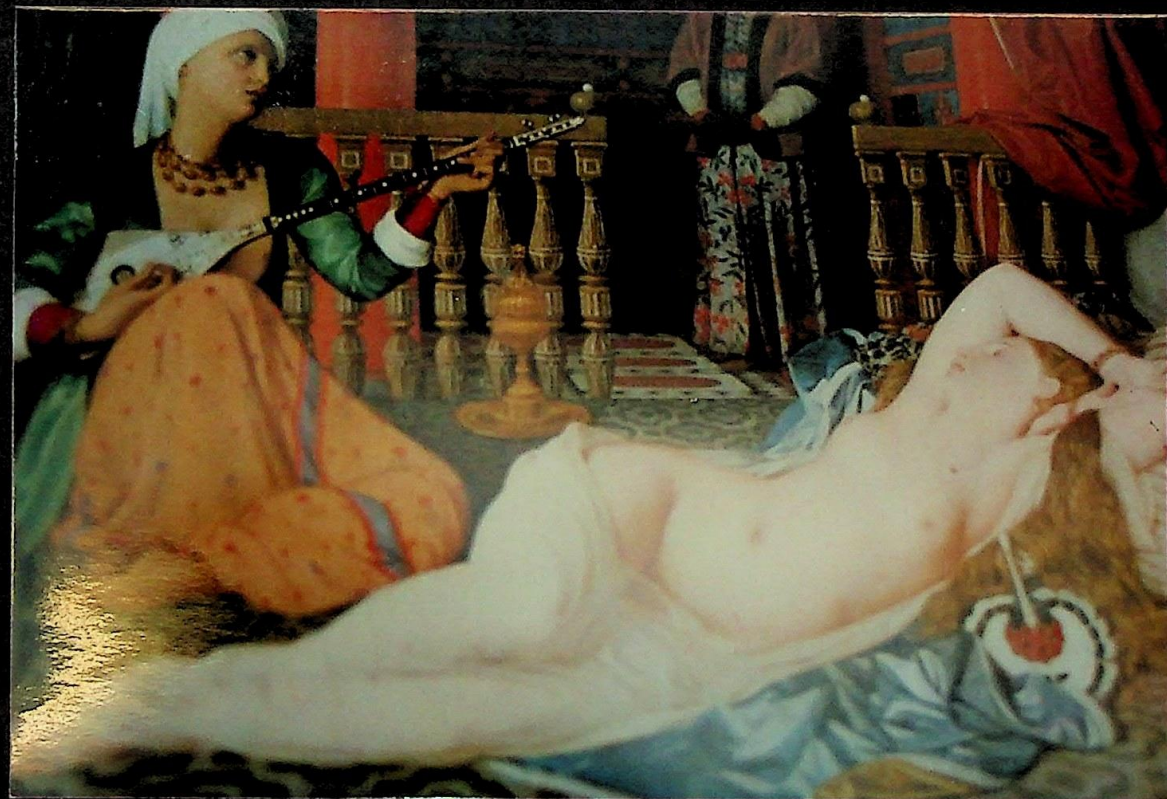




Plate 12.





some harem girls amuse themselves by tickling the cheek of a sleeping companion. These women are animals herded together in a slave market setting. Its implications are strongly voyeuristic and it has connotations of extreme sensuality, not only in the way the women are posing but also by the representation of the rich materials and jewelry they wear. These women's sexuality shown as erotic here is not the offensive weapon, but the fact that we know the eroticism is firmly in male possession.

In Ingre's paintings there are suggestions that these women are merely waiting for their male 'clients', in the very way they pose their squirming bodies, seductive smiles and their arch glances. Looking at them we sense the presence of a model who has just taken her clothes off, whereas Rodin's nudes have a nakedness of primeval man. Valery says of Ingre's nudes, "Ingre pursues grace to the point of monstrosity, the spine is never supple or long enough for him, the neck never flexible enough, or bodily curves conducive enough to the gaze which envelopes and touches them as it sees them."<sup>2</sup>

It is worth considering that artist like Ingre were dealing with themes that were overtly erotic during the time Rodin had devoted himself increasingly to studies of the nude figure. He concentrated on the model and drew her contours without looking down at his pencil, capturing her spontaneous gesture without preconceived meaning or conscious style. Yet he was concerned with the way women expressed themselves through the language of their bodies and he displayed a remarkable sensitivity to the physical substance of his means, and its relations to the character of the represented figure or situation.

Rodin's 'Lesbian' couples is among the most fascinating in Rodin's drawing career. During his later years he frequently had his



models pose not alone but in two's and three's. To him this encouraged uninhibited movement. 'The depiction of absolute calm is very rare for me,' Rodin once said in conversation with Paul Gsell. 'I have always tried to express the life of the soul through the mobility of the muscles.... The illusion of life in my art is achieved through good modelling and movement. These features, so to speak, are the life blood and breath of all good art.' Then Rodin added, "Every painter or sculptor who lends his figures movement...represents the transition from one pose to another, explores how one merges imperceptibly into the next. In their work you can still recognise something of what just was, and also something of what is just coming into being."<sup>3</sup> This coupling of women excited him unlike Courbet's 'Sleep' which was commissioned purely for the enjoyment of the male viewer/owner. Rodin lets his models follow their own intuitions. He captures their embraces as a loving natural act not with disdain and disgust like many of his contemporaries would have done.

In Old Mistresses- Woman, Art and Ideology, Rozista Parker and Griselda Pollack discuss how the omission of the female genitals in the depiction of the female nude is a rejection of male views of the woman's body. They suggest that it attacks the idea of woman's genitals as mysterious, hidden, and threatening. Rodin has depicted the female genitals in many of his nudes. These images were drawn and exhibited during the latter part of Rodin's life, and were considered by his contemporaries as among his most erotic works. The increased eroticism in Rodin's work seems to correspond to his less inhibited attitude towards women in later life. "At the age of twenty, I slighted them. I did not know that at seventy I would love them. I had scorned them because I was timid."<sup>4</sup>

His 'Reclining female nude, one hand under her raised leg', is of a woman masturbating. In this daring drawing, Rodin shows the



model involved in her own physical ecstasy, she does stare out at us, but it is not the same gaze we have seen in Ingre's females who await the pleasure of the man. Instead, Rodin's nude is totally engaged with the enjoyment of her own body. He feels no qualms whatsoever about depicting the body in such positions, since for him they symbolized the underlying organic principle of life, unveiled free of false shame. All these attitudes are natural: therefore he drew them naturally and they express a warm blooded human existence without denying the erotic stimulus. In Anne Hollander's essay, 'Seeing Through Clothes', she argues that "...Nudity must be carefully balanced with other visual content so that the erotic response does not dominate, causing the viewer's engagement with the painting to collapse into 'mere' sensuality. On the other hand, nudity must be depicted naturalistically enough to evoke the viewers erotic intent, yet on the other hand it must not be dominant enough to render this erotic attraction primary."<sup>5</sup>

It is true to say no image of the female can entirely escape the exploitation which constitutes male power in representation, but some are better than others, on the basis that they offer women images of themselves which are not humiliating or oppressive. Rodin is one of the better ones.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Irigaray in 'This Sex Which is One' in New French Feminism.
2. Paul Valery, Degas, Danse, Dessin.
3. Rodin quoted from 'Die Kunst conversation with the Master', collected by Paul Gsell.
4. Madame Aurel, 'Rodin et la Femme: Nudes edites de Rodin' in Grand Revue.
5. Anne Hollander, Seeing through Clothes.





Plate 13.



## CONCLUSIONS

It has not been my concern to argue for or against Rodin, but merely to show that during his time Rodin was indeed much more aware and concerned with the image of the woman than his fellow artists. That in fact he was guided by the belief that the nude figure was the truest medium for the expression of human thought and emotion. On closer observation of his work one cannot deny the eroticism in his drawings, but one can only come to the conclusion that this is only part of the whole.

Rodin's need to express the language of movement and line of the figure included not only his intentions but that of his models. Therefore, the model becomes a 'real' person rather than an object. He believed that any view of the human body was potentially of artistic interest and beauty, this view point was a culmination of his search and struggle- to push on and discover and re-discover his drawings until it became a spontaneous gesture in which he always saw and rendered the model in depth.

Rarely did Rodin consider a work unalterable; he accepted the ever changing aspects of his models and because of this attitude to his work, his drawings give us a rare view of the intricate combination of mind and body. I have tried to show that the sexual candour with which he depicted his nudes is so unlike Degas detachment, Titian's sensuality and Ingre's evocativeness whose work openly invites the erotic gaze. Rodin's drawings are neither objective depictions nor provocative images, rather he shows us that sexuality is a natural aspect of the nude.

The representation of the nude throughout the history of art is a cause for concern for all of us in its depictions of the female as an object, and indeed its use in today's culture. Advertisers use the glamorised female nude in every possible way and it has become accepted



by both sexes as part of the natural language of the media. I cannot but condemn this use of the female form. But because of this exploration of Rodin's later drawings, I cannot endorse the adverse reaction from the feminists to Rodin's recent exhibition in London. I believe their categorisation of his work to be unjustified and I hope that through this essay I have established that instead of the degradation of the female form, Rodin indeed celebrates it. Albert Elsen sums it up when he states, "His daring mode of reporting with his pencil often stressed expressiveness over anatomical beauty and correct proportion. Drawing was crucial to the artist's self-affirmation, and Rodin's own work in this medium was given strength by the passion to see, to know, and to feel."<sup>1</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Albert Elsen, Auguste Rodin -Reading on His Life and Work.



Plate 14.





Plate 15.





Plate 16.

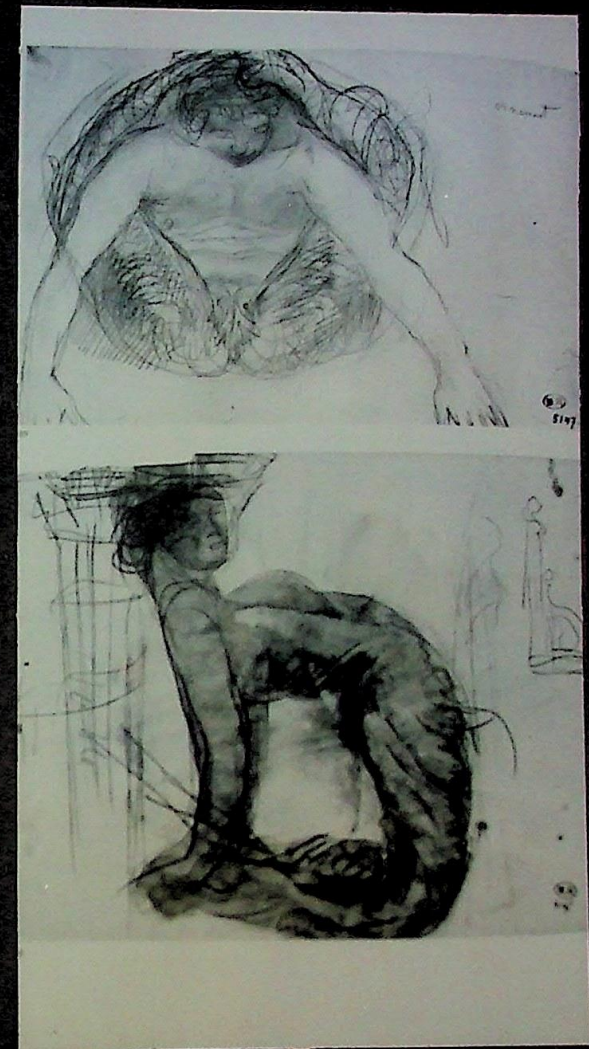






Plate 17.



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