

Rodin

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Auguste Rodin

(1840-1917)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Auguste Rodin

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Masters of Art Series

Auguste Rodin



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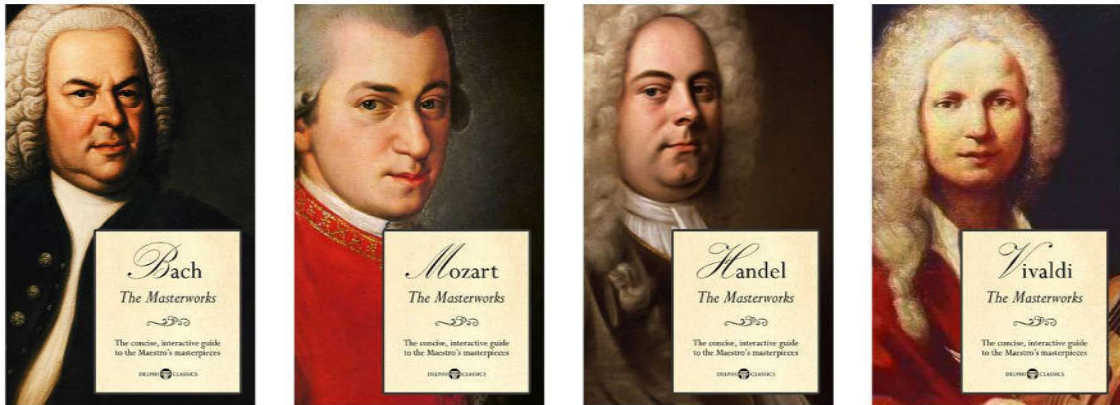
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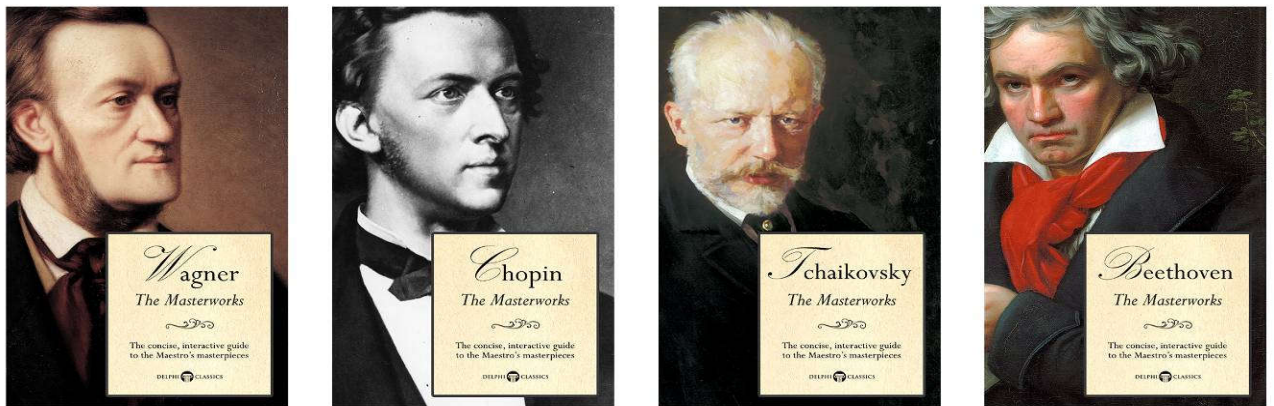
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The Highlights



Rue de l'Arbalète, 5th arrondissement of Paris — Auguste Rodin's birthplace



Rue de l'Arbalète, c. 1880



Rodin as a young man, c. 1862

The Highlights



In this section, a selection of Rodin's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Man with the Broken Nose (1864)



Generally considered the founder of modern sculpture, Auguste Rodin was born in 1840 into a working-class Parisian family. He was the second child of Marie Cheffer and Jean-Baptiste Rodin, a police department clerk, who later became an inspector at the Prefecture. He came from a particularly religious family; his sister, who was two years older, became a nun, though she died young in 1862 after a short illness, causing Rodin much grief. In spite of the family's modest means, the two children were educated with great care, with Marie studying at a convent and Auguste first attending the friars' school in the Val-de-Grâce quarter, before moving on to Beauvais, into a school founded by his uncle, a man of considerable learning, who had taken up teaching as a profession. The young Rodin remained under the tutelage of his uncle until his fourteenth year.

Between the ages of 14 and 17, he attended the Petite École, a school specialising in art and mathematics, where he studied drawing and painting. It was known as the 'little school' to distinguish it from the official Fine Arts School, and so it was especially intended for the education of young artisans. Fortunately, his first drawing teacher, Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, advocated that his students should first observe with their own eyes and draw from their recollections — a method that meant a great deal to Rodin, who would express his appreciation for his teacher in later years. Another professor, a sculptor named Fort, would also exert a great influence over Rodin, who in later years declared that he owed his vocation to Fort. Rodin also attended the Gobelins school, where there was a professor named Lucas, for whom he expressed almost equal gratitude. By all accounts, he was a diligent and devoted student, who cherished an ambition to become an accomplished artist. Eventually, his family consulted Hippolyte Maindron (1801-1884), a celebrated sculptor of the time, who was impressed with him and forwarded his name to the École des Beaux-Arts. Nevertheless, Rodin was rejected three times by the art establishment.

For several years he earned money through various crafts loosely connected to sculpting, including moulding, ornamental work and goldsmithing. This work enabled him to develop a greater understanding of his profession. At the age of twenty-three, after the death of his beloved sister, Rodin abruptly took religious vows and entered the monastery of the Eudistes, in the Faubourg St. Jacques. Fortunately for the history of art, this devotional impulse did not last long... Six months later he returned to his Paris home, where he met Rose Beuret, a seamstress and laundress, who for 53 years was destined to become the artist's lifelong companion, predeceasing him by only a few months.

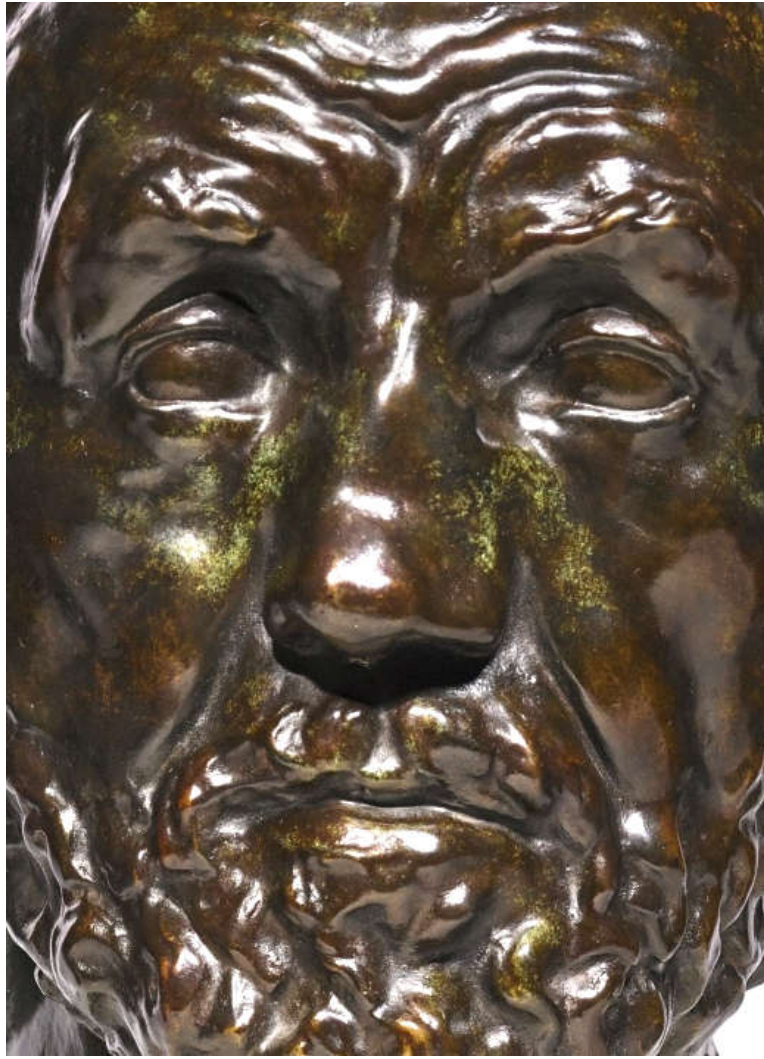
In late 1864 Rodin entered the studio of Carrier-Belleuse (1824-1887), a sculptor of noted talent and a pupil of David d'Angers. He remained as assistant to Carrier-Belleuse for about six years, though art historians doubt how much tuition Rodin received. In order to conform to the rules of the Salon, the only route for an artist to exhibit publicly at the time, Rodin is believed to have only attended a few mandatory lectures. In truth, he was merely an employee of the famous sculptor. Up to that time, Rodin's extant works were few and unexceptional, save for an 1864 bust of a *Man with the Broken Nose*, which was submitted to the Salon and duly refused. The piece is noted for its naturalism, ignoring the Salon's proscribed choice of grace and

aestheticism. Certainly, the broken nose and pronounced facial features were considered too ugly for the eyes of many.

During that period, Rodin had adapted a stable to become his atelier, where he produced this bust. It presents the weary face of a poor man, nicknamed 'Bibi', who frequented Rodin's neighbourhood. According to his biographer Rainer Maria Rilke, the sitter had a "calm demeanour and face. It was the face of a live man which, when explored, was full of agitation and disorder." For its execution, Rodin first produced a model in plaster, but the winter of 1864 had been a harsh one and the head of clay had frozen and split, as the entire back section shattered. Reduced to a facial mask, it was judged by the Salon as fragmentary. Rodin remained attached to this fine portrait, which he considered to be his 'first good sculpture'. Once the head was completed again and the hair re-portrayed in the style of a Greek philosopher, giving it the learned aspect of an antique bust, it was finally included in the Salon of 1875, representing Rodin's first official acknowledgement.

Although there is the unmistakable influence of many other busts sketched and copied by Rodin in the Louvre, *Man with the Broken Nose* shows the fidelity on contours that would later become characteristic of his work, as well as the naturalistic features of profound wrinkles and a severe expression. For many, the bust serves as a crucial link in Rodin's unique development as a sculptor.

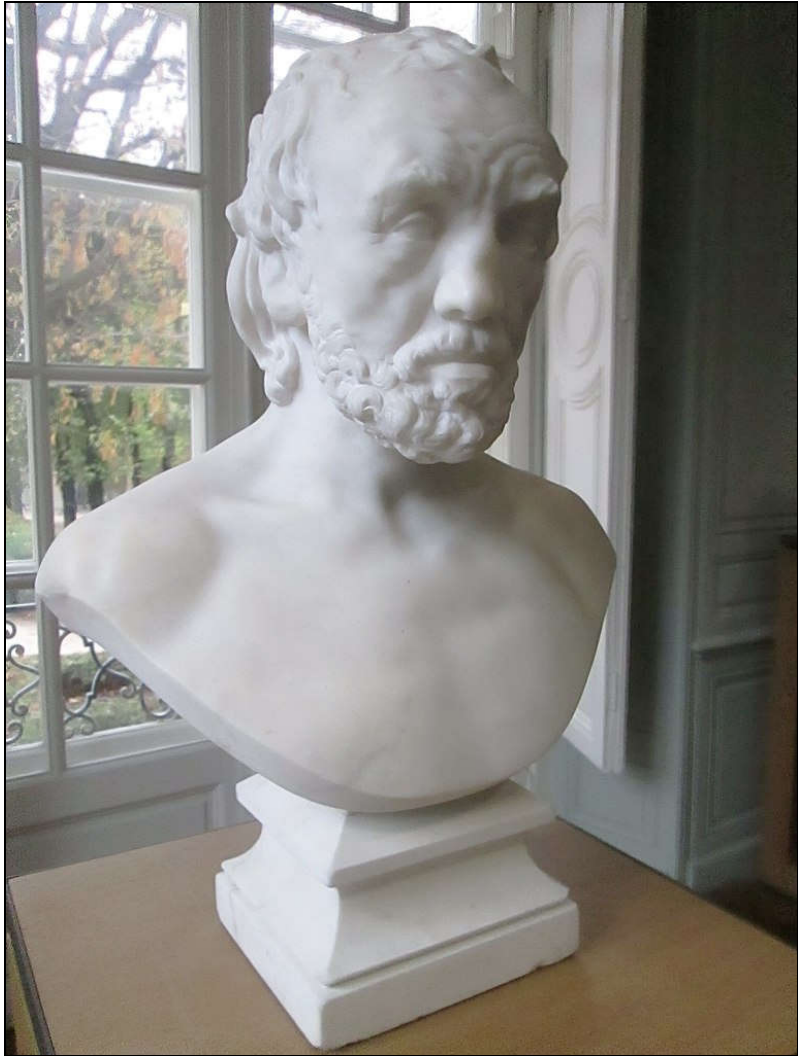




Detail



Detail



The marble bust made by Léon Fourquet in 1875, Musée Rodin



The French sculptor Hippolyte Maindron

Suzon (1873)



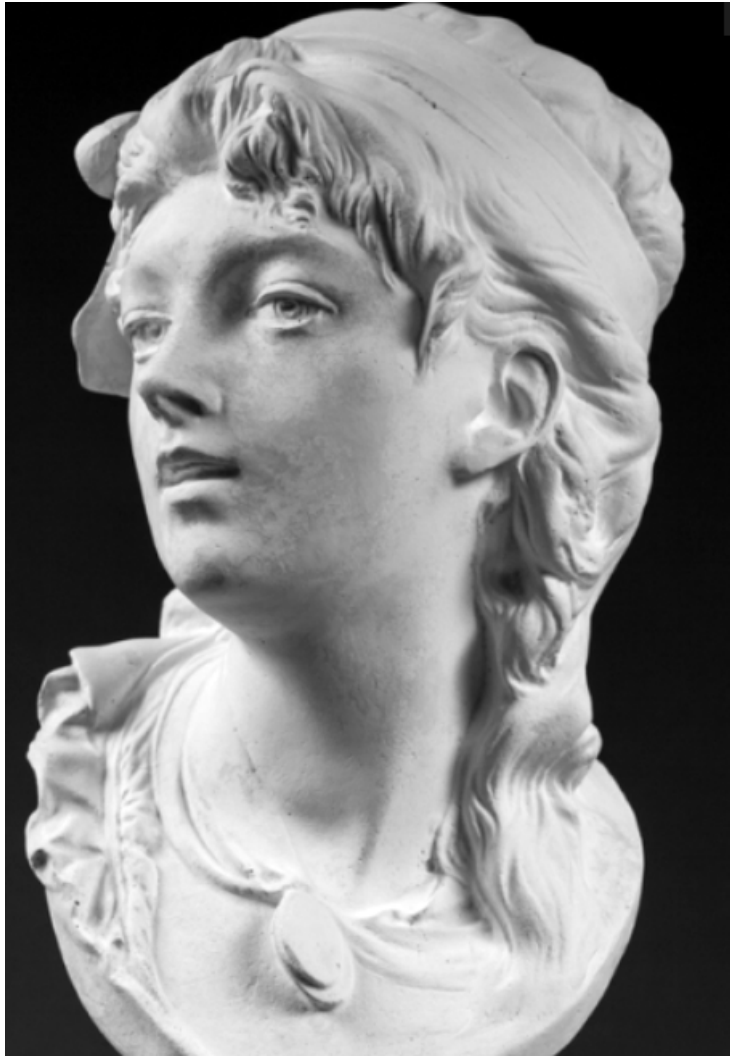
In later years Rodin's friend Camille Mauclair described him as being a man of "medium stature, with an enormous head on a massive trunk; prominent nose, flowing grey beard, and small bright eyes, in which there was the appearance of short-sightedness with a gentle irony". Undoubtedly, his imposing form gave him the presence of a man of power, emphasised by his rolling gait, troubled brow and rough hair. He spoke with a husky voice and with grave inflexions. In his tastes, he appeared simple, particular, reserved, courteous and genial without excess. In his early years he was timid, although with his eventual success this gave place to a calm and confident authority. One salient feature of his manner was a sense of immense, yet latent energy, which seemed to permeate from his sober and measured gestures.

The siege of Paris took place from 19 September 1870 to 28 January 1871, ending with the capture of the city by forces of the various states of the North German Confederation, led by the Kingdom of Prussia. The event is viewed as the culmination of the Franco-Prussian War, which saw the Second French Empire attempt to reassert its dominance over continental Europe by declaring war on the North German Confederation. During the siege, Rodin had chosen to remain in the city and he personally shouldered a gun as a National Guard. By February 1871 he had been judged unfit for military service due to his short-sightedness and so he went with Carrier-Belleuse to Belgium, intending to work beside his mentor and friend. However, a disagreement between the two arose. Instead, Rodin joined the Belgian sculptor Van Rasbourg, who at that time was commissioned to decorate the Brussels Stock Exchange. During this period, Rodin also completed several private commissions, including the piece featured in the following plate.

It presents the bust of a woman in the style of late eighteenth century Romantic works, which Rodin had been principally inspired by during that period. Completed while still in exile in Brussels, the bust is believed to have been produced in homage to Carrier-Belleuse, who in spite of their falling out, was a highly influential source to Rodin in his early days. Having worked in Carrier-Belleuse's studio from 1864 until 1871, Rodin shows in the bust how completely he had absorbed and mastered his mentor's approach to feminine beauty.

The work was first executed in terracotta, then in Sevres porcelain and finally in white marble. Later, when Rodin found himself in financial difficulties, he sold the bust to the Compagnie des Bronzes in Brussels, along with a *Bust of Dosia*. The Compagnie des Bronzes would be the only company he ever authorised to reproduce his works, explaining the variety of different editions and sizes of the two busts in public galleries and private collections. After further experimentation Rodin later turned against symmetry in sculpture, stating it had been one of "the sins of my youth".





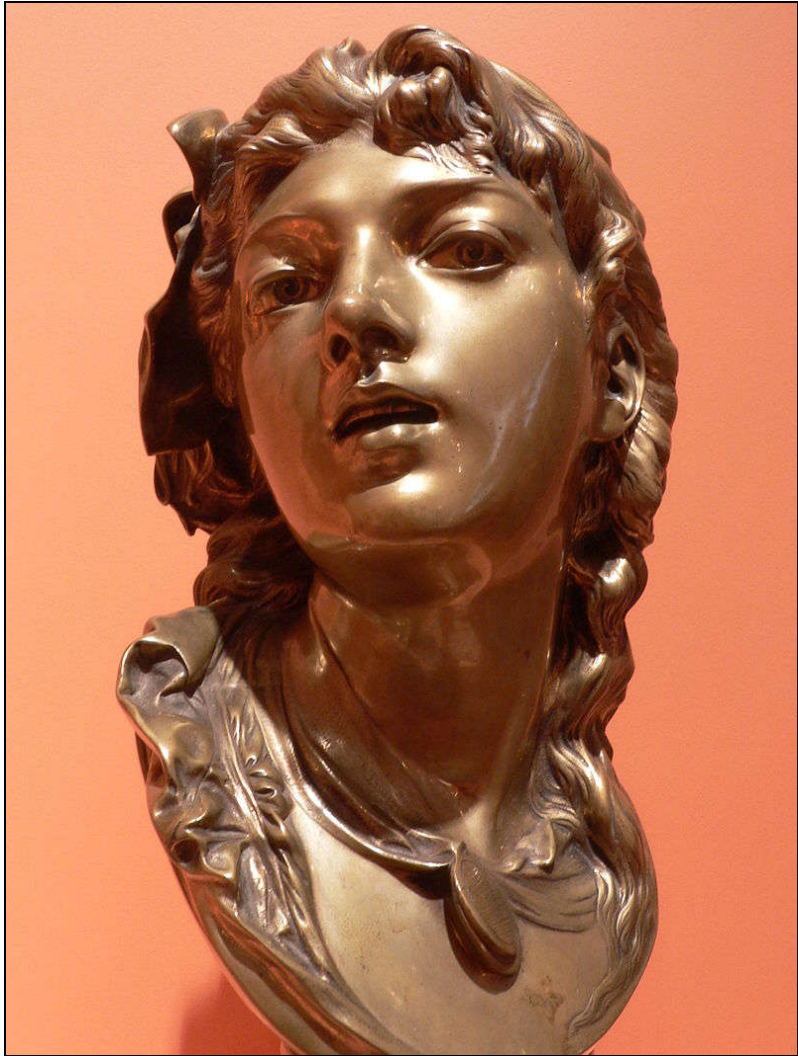
Detail



Detail



Detail



A bronze cast of the bust by Compagnie des Bronzes, 1875



Carrier-Belleuse, c. 1870

The Age of Bronze (1876)



In 1875 Rodin had saved enough money to carry out a long-nurtured ambition to go to Italy and study the works of the great sculptors Michelangelo and Donatello. As his funds were low, he could not stay long, but it was a fruitful visit that led to new wonders. The majority of his time was spent in Florence and Rome, though he also visited Venice and Naples. He came back enthusiastic and brimming with confidence, enthused by the great creations of the two Renaissance masters. His next sculpture was largely indebted to them, although it was original enough to make Rodin immediately famous and to stir some controversy.

Initially called 'The Vanquished', it is now known as 'The Age of Brass'. Noted for its naturalism and ambiguous subject matter, it was fashioned over a period of eighteen months. It depicts a suspended moment of human awakening, as a male nude stands upright, appearing to experience either suffering or joy. Some of the contemporary critics argued that the piece was an 'imposture', accusing the young sculptor of taking a mould from Nature. This led to the first scandal of Rodin's career, which would be plagued by many obstacles. It is believed that the work was partly inspired by Rodin's experiences in wartime, as it connotes themes of heroism and suffering, reflective of what many were undergoing during the Franco-Prussian conflict. The effects of being drafted, albeit for a short time, remained with the artist and subsequently inspired what was in fact his first full-size sculpture. For his model, he employed Auguste Neyt, a Belgium soldier, who had had some experience of the fighting that Rodin wished to reference in the work.

Although it originally had political meaning, Rodin decided to change the title to distance it from the negative criticism it had received while being exhibited in Belgium, hoping to remove any doubt that the work was a criticism of the French Government's decision to go to war in the first place. *The Age of Bronze* is a much more ambiguous title and one that reflects the classical style of the piece, rather than its original meaning.

The influence of Michelangelo was especially important in the development of the sculpture — note the similarities with *The Dying Slave* (1516), which Rodin would have seen many times before in Paris, where it is still displayed today in the Louvre. Both figures have a hand raised, touching the head. The muscular bodies of both sculptures echo the works of ancient Greece and Rome, portraying the emotion of their subjects with realistic accuracy. However, where *The Age of Bronze* represents a sensation of spiritual ecstasy, Michelangelo's piece represents pain and a final acceptance of death, with semi-erotic overtones.

Like the classical sculptures of young men leaning on a staff, *The Age of Bronze* captures a sense of movement and dynamism, unusual in the sculpture work of the time. The raised arm to the head gives a sense of heroism, driving the emotion and drama of the depicted posture. The emotion in the face is delineated with masterful precision, hinting at a spiritual and emotional ecstasy. By removing the traditional staff in the figure's right hand, Rodin creates a movement that is central to the piece. The bend in the right knee also adds to this impression, portraying a raw energy that is rarely seen in modern work.

The various accusations that Rodin had not carved this early life-sized work provoked him to create even larger human forms in his future works, defying the belief of his detractors. Receiving such an accusation was serious in the art world at the time and could have an irreparable effect on a young artist's career. You could say that the sculptor was a victim of his own skill, rendering a convincing human physique to such a high level of precision that it fooled many into thinking it was a mould. Few masters could even attempt such naturalistic brilliance. Friends of the artist came to his defense, as Rodin himself directly denied the claims. In recognition of his achievement, the State soon afterwards repaired the offence by purchasing the bronze statue and a third-class medal was awarded to the artist.

The Age of Bronze was later exhibited in Paris with Rodin's next sculpture, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, to great acclaim. To avoid any future criticism of his work, Rodin produced St. John on a smaller scale so that there was no question about this work being cast straight from a model. Although the accusations did upset Rodin, they generated a great deal of publicity, as members of the public went to see *The Age of Bronze* to judge for themselves.

The original sculpture was executed in plaster and first exhibited at the Cercle Artistique in Brussels in January 1877; it is believed to have been destroyed at a later date. The first bronze version was cast by Thiébaud Frères in May 1880, commissioned by the French Government, when marking official acceptance of the work. It was set up in the Luxembourg Gardens in 1884 and is now held in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. After this, the original plaster was returned to Rodin as it was too fragile to be used again and so he executed new plasters, probably from the original mould. Nowadays, there are more than 50 versions of *The Age of Bronze*, which have been cast in bronze, of which at least 26 were completed in Rodin's lifetime and can be found in museums and art galleries around the world. After Rodin's death, it wavered in popularity, but its enduring legacy of innovation has led many to describe the piece as the birth of modern sculpture.

The following plates are taken from the 1914 cast currently held in London's Victoria and Albert Museum.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail

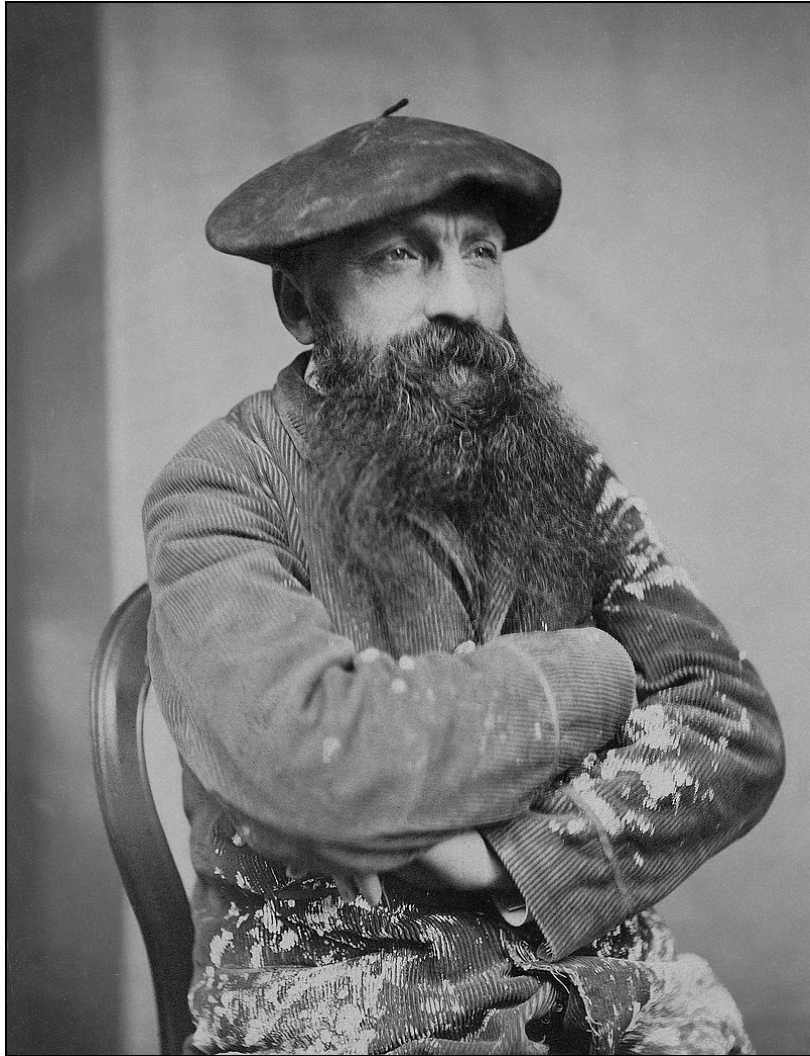




Michelangelo's 'The Dying Slave', Louvre Museum, Paris, c. 1517



The plaster cast from 1877



Rodin close to the time of executing 'The Age of Bronze'

The Gates of Hell (1880)



Rodin returned to Paris in 1877 and there he would remain more or less permanently, after completing a brief tour of France to visit the Cathedrals. Like his great predecessor Michelangelo, Rodin was especially interested in architecture, nurturing an ambition at some point to work in that medium, for which he sketched and recorded detailed notes. The time exploring the French cathedrals left a deep impression on him, which would later result in the 1910 book publication of *Les Cathédrales de France*, illustrated with numerous drawings by the sculptor. Throughout his career, Rodin explored diverse branches of the arts, including landscape painting, portraiture, ceramics, etching and porcelain production, for which he executed high-quality vases. It would seem he could excel in whatever art form he turned his attention to.

In late 1879, the Under-Secretary for Fine Arts, no doubt feeling disappointed for the aspersions cast on *The Age of Bronze*, offered Rodin the choice of a State commission. Still consumed with the enthusiasm of his Italian studies, he opted for a bold and monumental piece. He sought permission to execute a door for the prospective Museum of Decorative Arts and for his source material he selected Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, the first section of *The Divine Comedy*. The subject was *The Gate of Hell* and the project would occupy the artist on-and-off for the next two decades, gradually developing into a work of unparalleled genius. As with many of his works, the most telling feature was life in movement, featuring no fewer than 186 heroic and graceful figures, depicted in various phases of terror, distress and voluptuousness. Even the iconic symbol of *The Thinker* would make his first appearance in this piece, initially called 'The Poet', seen contemplating the mottled scene of anguish and devastation. Although the commission was supposed to be delivered in 1885, it consumed Rodin's studies for a lengthy period of time, demanding all of his artistic energy, as he produced countless drawings and models. In an article in *Le Matin*, Rodin confessed:

"For a whole year I lived with Dante, with him alone, drawing the eight circles of his inferno.. At the end of this year, I realized that while my drawing rendered my vision of Dante, they had become too remote from reality. So I started all over again, working from nature, with my models."

Eventually, he tired of the commission, criticising its progress, and so he borrowed ideas from *The Gate of Hell*, using it as a resource pool from which to take ideas for new and quicker-to-accomplish sculptures. Some art historians have gone so far as to suggest that he sourced nearly all of his masterpieces from *The Gate of Hell* project. Nonetheless, he would later return to the great commission, finally arranging the materials into a definite structure, fixed in both marble and bronze pieces. Sadly, it was never completely finished and the Decorative Arts Museum was never built. Near the end of his life, Rodin donated the sculptures, drawings and reproduction rights to the French government. In 1919, two years after his death, the Hôtel Biron, where he had worked in a studio on the ground floor producing the sculptures for *The Gates of Hell*, became the Musée Rodin, housing a cast of the final piece.

The monumental bronze sculptural group stands at six metres high, four metres wide and one metre deep. Several casts have been made over the years, which are

now located in various galleries around the world. The original plaster model is on display in the Musée D'Orsay, Paris (illustrated in the following plates). The 186 figures range from 15 centimetres up to more than one metre high and several are represented as independent free-standing statues. The lines from Dante's *Inferno* believed to have been chosen for representation are:

Through me the way into the suffering city,
Through me the way to the eternal pain,
Through me the way that runs among the lost.
Justice urged on my high artificer;
My Maker was Divine authority,
The highest Wisdom, and the primal Love.
Before me nothing but eternal things
Were made, and I endure eternally.
Abandon every hope, who enter here.

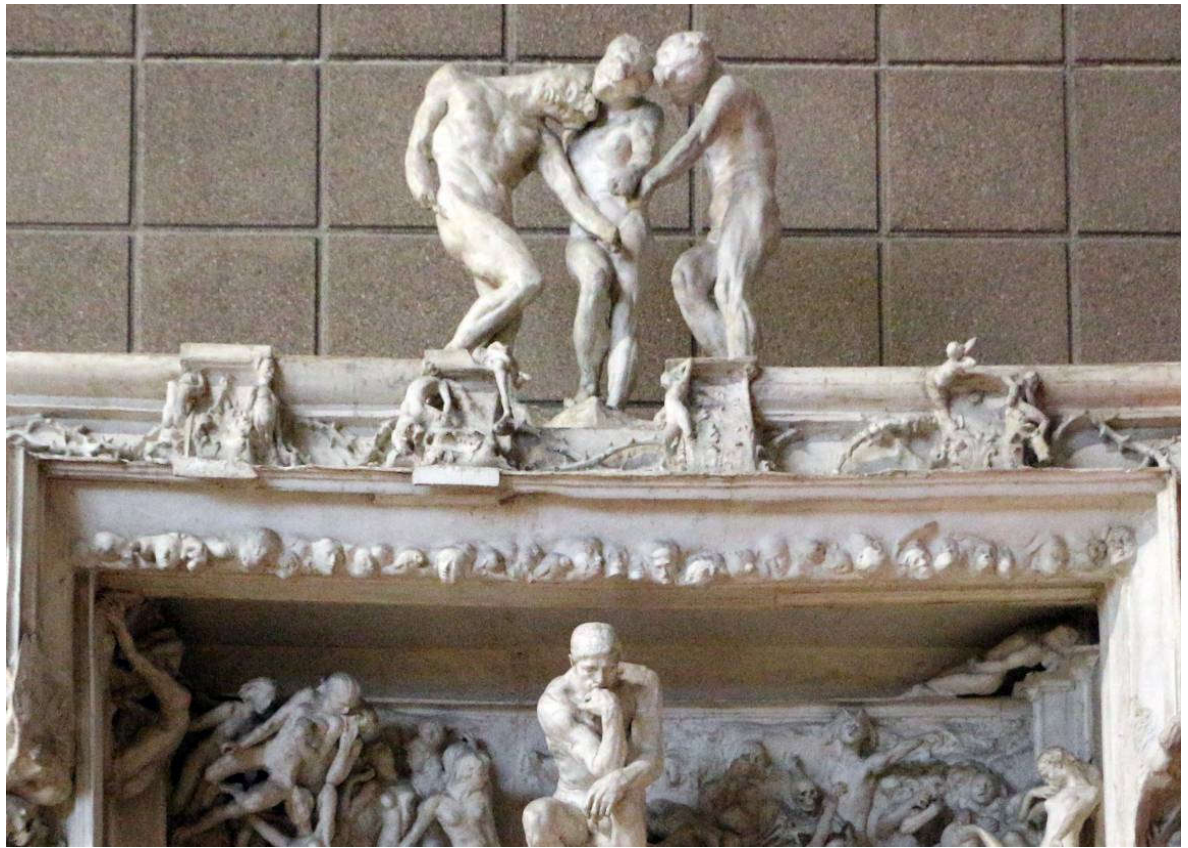
DANTE, *Inferno*, 3.1-9

Rodin had intended for the viewer to walk toward the artwork, perhaps up a flight of stairs, so that they felt overwhelmed frontally by the appearance of gates, conjuring the hell of Dante's epic poem. A work of such scale and scope had never been attempted by a sculptor before, though some inspiration came from Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* (c. 1420) at the Baptistery of St. John in Florence, which consists of several bronze doors depicting dynamic frieze-like figures of Old Testament stories. Another source of inspiration came from Rodin's recent studies of medieval cathedrals, combining high and low relief. Yet another source must have been Michelangelo's impressive fresco of *The Last Judgment*, as well as Eugène Delacroix's Romantic masterpiece *The Barque of Dante*.

As well as the enduring icon of *The Thinker*, located above the door panels – perhaps representing Dante looking down at the horrors of the *Inferno* — *The Kiss* had also been originally conceived as part of the project, portraying initial joy before final damnation. Rodin ultimately decided to remove the figure as it seemed to conflict with the numerous figures of suffering. Other notable sculptures that first appeared in *The Gates of Hell* include: *Ugolino and His Children* (according to the story, Ugolino ate the corpses of his children after they died by starvation); *The Three Shades*, an over-life size group that originally pointed to the phrase “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here”; *Fleeting Love*, inspired by the story of Francesca da Rimini's love affair with Paolo Malatesta, a medieval tale of adultery and murder; and *Meditation*, which appears on the rightmost part of the tympanum, later used for the celebrated *Monument to Victor Hugo*.

Interestingly, the majority of the individual figures of *The Gates of Hell* do not originate from Dante's text, but serve instead as Rodin's re-imagining of the poet's hell, personifying his own grand and dismal conception of the scene.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



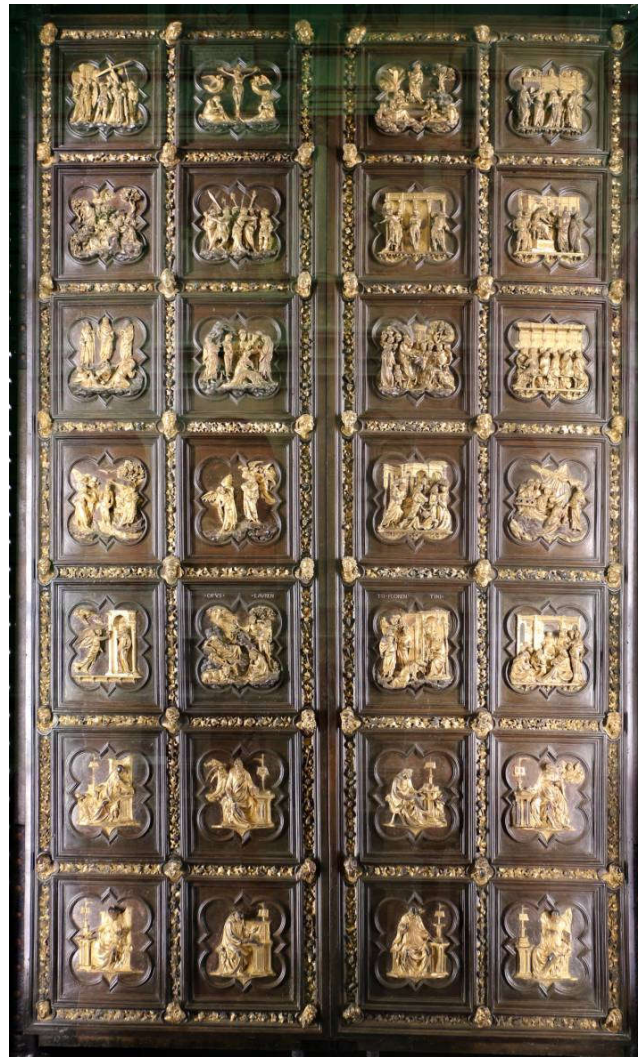
Detail



A bronze cast at the Museo Soumaya, Mexico City



'The Thinker', Musée Rodin



North doors of Lorenzo Ghiberti's 'Gates of Paradise', Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, 1402-1424



The East doors



'The Barque of Dante' by Eugène Delacroix, Musée Louvre, Paris, 1822

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