

Sculpting Passion: The Intertwined Careers of Auguste Rodin & Camille Claudel

Background Notes

Dr Emma Stirrup — 27 September 2023



Figure 1: Auguste Rodin
(1840-1917), photograph 1880s



Figure 2: Camille Claudel
(1864 - 1943), photograph 1884

“Please do something for this woman of genius (the word is not too strong) for whom I bear such love, and for her art.”

(Auguste Rodin to the art critic, Gabriel Mourey)

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In this seminar we will consider the careers and storied relationship between Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel. The two sculptors first met in 1882 as tutor and student and, despite nearly an age difference of twenty-four years, they shared a profound artistic and personal connection that changed the course of their lives and left an indelible mark on art history. As film and theatre productions attest, the story of Rodin and Claudel is undoubtedly an intoxicating one of intertwined creativity, passion, and personal sacrifice. We will address that for both artists, their devotion to their art and the call of the 'muse' was primary – and their decade-long relationship highlights the transformative power of artistic collaboration, the depths of human emotion, and the complexities of navigating love and individual ambition within the context of artistic genius.

At the time of his meeting Claudel in 1882, Rodin's career was taking flight after twenty years of struggle and even scandal in artistic circles. In 1880 he won his first major commission, *The Gates of Hell*, (**Fig. 3**) and in the same year the French Government confirmed his status by purchasing a cast of his controversial work, *The Age of Bronze*, (**Fig. 4**) that had previously attracted career-damaging accusations of *surmoulage* (casting from life). The following year Rodin produced his first works for *The Gates*, his major life work, modelling both *The Thinker* and *The Kiss*, placing him at the centre of the artistic and cultural changes sweeping through Paris in the Belle Époque.

Auguste Rodin was essentially self-taught and had endured years of limited recognition and failure, including all three attempts for entry into the École des Beaux-Arts, the established and expected route for a successful artistic career. Instead, with his father's unceasing support, Rodin learned his craft as an apprentice in the decorative arts. Through the years he was sustained by an unflinching artistic vision, and by the 1880s his rejection of the established and taught rules of classical idealism and composition, his innovative, naturalistic approach was finding critical acclaim and a broader audience. Winning major competitive public commissions however was to prove a career-long challenge.



Figure 3: Auguste Rodin. *The Gates of Hell*, 1880-1917. Musée d'Orsay



Figure 4: Auguste Rodin. *The Age of Bronze*, 1877 (cast 1914). Victoria and Albert Museum

Rodin's emphasis on emotional expression over formal perfection set him apart and, unlike his contemporaries' polished surfaces, serene and idealized figures of the academy, his sculptures were rendered with rough textures and dynamic, often fragmented forms. His willingness to challenge traditional standards of heroic beauty is evident in his embrace of the imperfect, the human, and the emotionally charged. He frequently sought local, non-professional models for his works, intending to capture the essence of raw human experiences and infuse a sense of authenticity to resonate deeply with viewers. His interest in physical expression, movement and natural form is explored at every turn, from intimate studio sketches to major public monuments. We will look at Rodin's written defence of his pursuit of a masterpiece, a new level of psychological depth in public artworks, his desire to offer viewers a more profound and relatable engagement with monuments, in his commission for *The Burghers of Calais* (1885). **(Fig. 5)**



Figure 5: Auguste Rodin. *The Burghers of Calais*, 1884-89.
Calais Town Hall

Rodin won the commission a year after he had invited Camille Claudel to join his studio as an assistant. The two artists had met when Claudel was a star pupil of Rodin's lifelong friend, Alfred Boucher. The latter had just won the Prix de Rome (a prize limited to École graduates) and, as a personal favour, Rodin agreed to oversee his students – four young women sculptors. Several years earlier Claudel's father, Louis-Prospere Claudel, had approached Boucher to ascertain the genuine artistic talent of his daughter who had, since childhood, shown a fierce determination to become a sculptor. Boucher was so impressed he introduced Claudel to Paul Nogent, director of the École des Beaux-Arts, who equally encouraged her talent over the years. **(Fig. 6)** The Claudel family moved to Paris to facilitate Camille's professional training – 'ateliers féminins' had begun to open regularly since the early 1870s, and in the Salon of 1883 of the 1,047 sculptors who exhibited works, 101 were women – the competition for recognition, and an enduring career, was fierce.



Figure 6: Camille Claudel. *La Vieille Hélène*, 1881-82. Musée Camille Claudel

Letters reveal that Rodin was smitten at first sight with the eighteen-year-old student, a marked contrast with Claudel's declared great passion for sculpture as a chosen way of life first and foremost. Claudel asserted her independence and competitiveness from the outset. It is documented that she 'tyrannized' Rodin in the early years of their relationship, even drawing out a contract with her lover in October 1886 excluding other, rival students from his studio and including promises to promote her work to his "influential friends". Undoubtedly, Claudel was unlike any other woman in Rodin's life, and scholars note the absence of a 19th-century bourgeois woman's 'voice' in her letters to the sculptor. Recognition of her extraordinary artistic talent is never questioned in the period, Claudel worked alongside Rodin on several of his major commissions, including *The Gates of Hell* and *The Burghers of Calais*. Though tumultuous from the outset, their relationship was both public and established in the artistic circles of Paris. Tender portraits of the lovers are amongst the most important works of both oeuvres, Rodin in the study *Camille Claudel* and *Thought*, and Claudel's portrait bust *Rodin*, exhibited at the Salon of 1892.

The theme of lovers also dominated their oeuvres, amongst others, Rodin's *Eternal Idol* and *The Kiss*, (**Fig. 7**) commissioned in marble by the French Government for the 1889 Exposition Universelle, and Claudel's *Sakuntala* (1888) and *The Waltz* (c.1890). (**Fig. 8**) We will address how in both these dynamic sculptures, and changing commissions, Claudel captured the human

form with a unique blend of strength and vulnerability – and, in a career so entwined with Rodin’s, we will explore her unique approach to her art.



Figure 7: Auguste Rodin. *The Kiss*,
c. 1881-82, marble c. 1888.
Musée Rodin



Figure 8 : Camille Claudel. *The Waltz*,
c.1893. Musée Rodin

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In 1892, Claudel ended the romantic relationship to forge her own path, similarly both artists explored their painful separation and heartbreak in sculpture: Rodin in *Eternal Idol* and *The Adieu*, and Claudel most daringly and tragically in *Maturity*, a thinly veiled allegory of the love triangle she could no longer endure. Both artists communicated over the following years, Rodin initially funded Claudel’s studio and is recorded as working tirelessly behind the scenes to promote her as a sculptor, secretly seeking commissions for her in her own right. Rodin promoted her piece, *The Waltz* as a state purchase – and rebuked officials for rejecting a work comprising nude figures from a woman artist. When Rodin completed his sculpture of *Balzac* (**Fig. 9**), a work “grander than life and poised to provide the last great aesthetic turmoil in the nineteenth century”, it was Claudel’s opinion that he sought and prized.



Figure 9: Auguste Rodin.
Balzac, 1892-97, (cast
1935). Musée Rodin

Understanding and depicting the artist-muse relationship, typically as a female figure whispering into the creator's ear, haunted Rodin's imagination for years. There is little doubt that he found his greatest muse in Claudel, his very first exploration of the artist-muse concept is recorded in a drawing of 1883 – and we will consider several examples of the theme executed throughout his career in the seminar.

Through the 1890s and turn of the century, Claudel created an important, irrefutably modern oeuvre (though many of her works were destroyed by her own hands), but it would take over half a century for her independent creative status to be widely examined, and today her contributions to the complex genealogy of modernism are still being re-evaluated. Instead, it is her tragic biography that has overshadowed her artistic contribution – the premature end to her career, her chosen isolation and demise into a state of increasing paranoia, principally focussed on Rodin's influence over her life, and her thirty-year institutionalization in an asylum until her death, that has dominated her art historical reception.

By contrast, at the turn of the 20th century, Rodin was considered the most famous living sculptor, in 1908 he moved his Paris studio to the Hotel Biron, an 18th-century mansion that housed a flourishing, avant-garde creative community, residents included Henri Matisse, Rainer Maria Rilke and Isadora Duncan. The move was the beginning of the final great artistic undertaking of his life – the creation of his own museum – the French government accepted Rodin's gift to the nation of his entire estate in 1916, an unrivalled public relations move in terms of legacy. The Musée Rodin opened to the public in August 1919.

Further reading:

Emerson Bowyer and Anne-Lise Desmas, *Camille Claudel*, Getty Museum, forthcoming November 2023*

Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*, Yale, 1993

Rachel Corbett, *You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin*, 2016

Celeste Farge, et al. *Rodin and the Art of Ancient Greece*, 2018

Rosalind Krauss, *Passages: A History of Sculpture from Rodin to Smithson*, Paris, 1997

The Making of Rodin, Tate exhibition catalogue, 2021

Reine-Marie Paris, *Camille Claudel*, 1988

J. A. Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth, *Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel*, 1994

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