

# Rodin & His Legacy

Auguste Rodin (French, 1840-1917) was arguably the most influential sculptors of the 19th century. With the exception of Antoine Barye, who was one of Rodin's teachers, and the British artist Frederic Leighton, whose work typifies a lingering Victorian attachment to classical finish, all of the sculptors represented in this gallery were directly influenced by him. Rodin's transformative encounter with the art of the Renaissance master Michelangelo, while in Italy in 1876 at the relatively mature age of 36, represented a turning point. As he later reminisced to his student Bourdelle, "It was Michelangelo who liberated me from academicism." In the late work, Michelangelo displayed an unprecedented willingness to distort the human anatomy for expressive ends—something Rodin would push even further by abandoning the usual polish of the classical tradition in favor of a deliberately raw surface that retained the trace of his own hands. The physicality of his artistic process was thus indelibly registered in the bronzes, which were often cast from plaster models based on ideas first modeled in clay or wax. Rodin also frequently distilled the emotional essence of subjects derived from textual sources, whether Greek mythology, the Bible, or, most famously, Dante's *Inferno*, from which his celebrated *Gates of Hell* derived and perhaps his most recognizable statue, *The Thinker* originated. Such ambitious commissions spun off variations of nude bodies in entirely original and sometimes shocking poses. Rodin's modernity was not limited to the aesthetics of fragmentation and expressive unfinish. His mode of production, which relied on studio assistants, and the replication made possible by multiple foundries, effectively elevated the authenticity of the artistic concept from its execution, or, in other words, the artist's literal hand. This is one aspect of Rodin's artistic practice that is still in evidence in contemporary art today.



IMAGE: EDWARD J. STEICHEN (AMERICAN, 1879-1973), *RODIN—THE THINKER*, 1902, GUM BIOCHROMATE PRINT. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GILMAN COLLECTION, PURCHASE, HARRIETTE AND NOEL LEVINE GIFT, 2005.



Auguste Rodin  
French, 1840-1917  
*The Walking Man*, ca. 1880

Bronze

Museum purchase with funds provided by General Art Acquisition Fund, 1997.9

Like the other tabletop sculptures on view here, this is a reduced replica of a subject originally conceived at nearly life-size. As is still the case today, 19th-century artists would routinely authorize limited editions of such smaller scaled repetitions of their most successful masterpieces. Also typical of Rodin's working methods, this sculptural idea was derived from an earlier project that the artist took on some twenty years earlier: a striding monumental sculpture of St. John the Baptist. In Rodin's generative practice, one representational subject often resulted in a flowering of a host of other ideas to which he would return again and again. The artist's creative fervor is signified through a deliberate fragmentation of the body, sketch-like roughness in the modelling, and a vigor of execution that expresses the explosive vitality of the human form.



Antoine Bourdelle  
French, 1861-1929  
*Dying Centaur*, after 1914

Bronze

Gift of Wright S. Ludington, 1945.6.2

This sculptural idea was conceived by Bourdelle at the height of his powers, after his break with his mentor Rodin and during the most fecund period of his career. At the time of its creation, Bourdelle was also undertaking several other ambitious public monuments and was very active as a teacher to younger, aspiring artists like Germaine Richier and Giacometti. The narrative kernel derives from Greek myth—in this case, the story of the last centaur, Chiron, who was accidentally wounded by one of Hercules' poison arrows and granted his wish for death by the Gods to end his suffering. However, the anguish of the centaur's body, in contrast with the serene acceptance of his facial expression, symbolizes the same universality of willing self-sacrifice associated with traditional representations of Christ's passions. As such, the sculpture personifies the sublime victory of mind over body, intellect over the passions.



Antoine Bourdelle  
French, 1861-1929  
*Hercules the Archer*, 1909  
Bronze  
Bequest of Wright S. Ludington, 1993.1.27

With this compositional invention, Bourdelle hit upon one of the most enduring images of the early 20th century. Originally conceived as a monumental bronze, depicting one of the Labors of Hercules, and exhibited at the Salon in 1910, the idea was so appealing that Bourdelle authorized multiple versions, which are now on view at museums throughout the world. While the sculptor at first struggled to escape the long shadow cast by Rodin, for whom he worked as a studio assistant, this sculpture displays the greater planarity and archaic source material from which his mature work drew inspiration. The tension and resolve of the archer's face, echoed by the terrific strain of his muscled body, have become a universal symbol of humanity's ability to overcome even the most insurmountable of obstacles.



Frederic, Lord Leighton  
British, 1830-1896  
*An Athlete Wrestling a Python*, 1877  
Bronze  
Museum purchase with funds provided by Lord and Lady Ridley-Tree, 1997.45

Leighton exhibited a life-size bronze version of this subject at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1877. Known primarily as a history painter, somewhat in step with the Pre-Raphaelites, this was his first attempt at ambitious sculpture. The statue was immediately hailed by critics as one of the outstanding, modern reinterpretations of the classical staple of the male nude. Meant to rival such canonical antique precedents as Laocoön and His Sons, Leighton's athlete is shown at the moment of greatest tension, as he struggles to subdue the outsized serpent. The passionate drama of this pitting of man and monster signaled a decisive break with the more austere treatments favored by earlier 19th-century sculptors such as Antoine Barye, whose *Theseus and the Minotaur* is on view nearby.



Antoine-Louis Barye  
French, 1796-1875  
*Theseus and the Minotaur*, 1857  
Bronze  
Museum purchase, Vote for Art Fund, 1983.5

The moment captured is that of the final vanquishing of the terrifying man-monster by the Athenian hero Theseus, who has braved the labyrinth so that the promised seven young men and women would not be sacrificed to the Minotaur, as commanded by King Minos. Barye's sculpture, despite the violent struggle that it depicts, exudes an almost uncanny calm in accordance with Neoclassical precepts. The two bodies are as if locked in a fearsome dance, with arms and legs echoing each other. Theseus's expression is oddly tranquil, so confident is he in his purpose. When Barye first exhibited the original cast in the 1843 Salon, it was rejected by the academic judges. He had to wait until the regime change of the short lived Second Republic for the Salon juries to acknowledge the brilliance of his sculptural idea when it was accepted for exhibition in 1851. Barye is best known as the most celebrated *animalier* of the Romantic period, even if this subject more clearly resonates with his earlier training under the neoclassical sculptor François-Joseph Bosio.



Germaine Richier  
French, 1902-1959  
*Le Feuille*, 1948  
Bronze  
Bequest of Wright S. Ludington, 1993.1.38

Richier trained with two of Rodin's students: Louis-Jacques Guiges, formerly a studio assistant to the master, and Rodin's star pupil, Antoine Bourdelle. At Bourdelle's studio, she crossed paths with the better-known Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who was her exact contemporary. Not unlike Giacometti, Richier explored the expressive power of the emaciated human form, which, in these years, inevitably elicited memories of the ravaged bodies that were so savagely recorded in documentary photographs and films of the devastation wrecked by the World Wars. Richier's half-woman, half-tree figure reflects this sentiment and recalls, in condensed form, the Ovidian tale of the nymph Daphne, who escapes Apollo's unwanted advances when her father, a river god, transforms her into a laurel tree. The pitted bronze surface, complete with incised leaves and bark-like skin, appears to be in a state of decay, while her painfully attenuated limbs bear a weightless fragility.



Georg Kolbe  
German, 1877-1947  
*Young Girl*, ca. 1926  
Bronze  
Gift of Mrs. Otto Jeidels, 1950.1

The lyrical elegance of this sculpture is typical of Kolbe's mature style. Like Rodin, Kolbe sought to update the classical staple of the nude in a modern idiom. His 1912 sculpture *The Dancer* (illustrated below) established him as one of Germany's most popular 20th-century sculptors. By contrast, the roughly worked surface of *Young Girl* evokes a sadness quite distinct from the more idealized, smooth contours of *The Dancer*. The juxtaposition of her slight, adolescent body with the charred, ash-like surface, effectively fuses the ideas of youth and old age, life and death. Although Kolbe insisted that he refused an offered commission to sculpt a likeness of Adolf Hitler, he did participate in official exhibitions sponsored by the Third Reich, which favored depictions of young men and women in heroic poses.



GEORG KOLBE, *THE DANCER*, PHOTOGRAPH BY LUDWIG SCHNORR VON CAROLSFELD, 1910/1911