



RODIN IN THE UNITED STATES: CONFRONTING THE MODERN TEACHER RESOURCE

“The artist must create a spark before he can make a fire, and before art is born, the artist must be ready to be consumed by the fire of his own creation.” —Auguste Rodin

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Auguste Rodin (French, 1840–1917) is one of the most celebrated sculptors of the modern age, represented in museums and private collections across the globe. However, this was not always the case.

From his first sculpture to enter an American museum in 1893 and culminating with his popular revival in the 1980s, this exhibition follows Rodin’s rise to eminence in the United States due in large part to the collectors, critics, and curators who helped make it happen.

The nearly seventy sculptures and drawings in the exhibition encompass many of Rodin’s best-known compositions, including *The Thinker*, *Monument to Balzac*, and *The Kiss*, as well as less-familiar subjects and an exceptional number of his expressive and probing drawings. The exhibition shows Rodin working across an array of media—from terracotta and plaster to bronze and marble—and illuminates his creative process, from studies and maquettes to completed works. *Rodin in the United States* also reveals Rodin’s incredible daring and inventiveness as he continually pushed against and beyond traditional notions of sculpture.

ARTIST BIO

Auguste Rodin (French, 1840–1917) followed an unusual path to becoming one of the most innovative, influential, celebrated, and controversial sculptors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rejected at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he studied instead at the Petite École, where copying traditional styles was promoted. For twenty years, he worked for jewelers, decorative artists, and masons. He honed his skill as a modeler of clay in other sculptors’ studios, took evening art classes, and eventually set up his own studio, where he worked from live models.

ART-MAKING PROCESS

Drawing

- When Rodin was a child, he frequently sketched things he saw. He liked drawing, which was a useful way for him to pause and observe the world around him. He continued drawing throughout his career, not as a preparatory step before sculpting but purely for enjoyment of the medium. He used a variety of drawing styles, including “blind drawing,” which involved drawing what he saw in front of him without looking at the paper. With this method, he was able to capture a form’s sense of motion and energy, which was more natural and visually interesting than a perfectly posed, stationary subject. The idea or essence of the subject was more important to him than were its details.

Sculpture

- Rodin’s sculpture making was a blend of traditional and new processes. He began each of his sculptures by first creating a model out of clay, wax, or plaster. He could produce multiples in these inexpensive mediums and could hold them in reserve for use in future compositions. He often even cut the model of a sculpture apart to recombine hands, legs, torsos, and heads to alter a composition or to

create a completely new work (called an assemblage). After models were completed, he worked with the many assistants in his studio, all of whom were experts of various materials (such as marble or bronze), to create the final, full-fledged sculpture. Assistants used the clay models that Rodin created either as reference (if they were carving marble) or for casts (if they were pouring bronze).

THEMES

The following themes can be pulled from Rodin's body of work. Educators can use these to help inform how they introduce Rodin's work to students.

Expression

- Rodin was interested in expressing human emotion through his work. He often broke from convention by representing people around him instead of models celebrated for their classical beauty. Some of his sculptures looked unfinished compared to his contemporaries, showing the traces of his process instead of being completely polished. He also exhibited fragments, going against academic standards that privileged pieces showing the whole body posed in a traditional manner. He verged on abstraction sometimes with his work because of how he stretched or emphasized parts of the human body, intending to show the emotion and motion contained in them. Further, some of his works had no narrative framework, or they expressed sexuality with an unapologetic frankness that was considered scandalous at the time.

Fragments

- You will notice that many of Rodin's sculptures are incomplete portions of the human body—just the bust of a person, or hands, or a torso. This was in defiance of traditions of the time, where a work was often only considered complete if it depicted the full body. Rodin was also interested in communicating the energy and emotion of the full form through a fragment. He would even take fragments from one sculpture and combine it with others to see what he could discover about the overall form's emotion and expression.

DISCUSSION

Encourage students to look at specific works by Rodin and explore the following questions and activities:

- If this work of art were alive, what emotions or thoughts do you think it would have? What makes you say that? Can you mimic the work's expression? Does this change how you feel about it?
- What feature(s) in the sculpture create(s) an expression of energy and dynamic movement? What makes you say that?
- What are some words you would use to describe the quality of this work's surface?
- To Rodin, this was a finished work of art. Does this feel unfinished to you? Why or why not?
- Put your hand out in front of you and imagine you're drawing or molding some of the lines you see in the work before you. What does that feel like? How do you think Rodin drew or sculpted those lines?
- Ask students to assume the pose of some of the sculptures they see around them. This is called tableau! Where is their weight when they assume the sculpture's pose? How does it feel?
- Pass out paper and pencils and instruct students to gravitate toward one of the sculptures in the gallery. Once they have each found a piece, give them sixty seconds to practice Rodin's blind drawing method—they must draw observationally without looking at their paper until the sixty seconds are up. Compare, share, and reflect together: What happened? How did it feel? Why might Rodin have enjoyed using this method?