

AUGUSTE RODIN • THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

A Resource for Educators



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



AUGUSTE RODIN · THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

A Resource for Educators

NELLY SILAGY BENEDEK



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

This resource was produced in conjunction with the special exhibition

RODIN'S MONUMENT TO VICTOR HUGO

held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from October 6, 1999, through January 12, 2000

The exhibition was organized by the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation

*The exhibition in New York was made possible, in part, by
The Georges Lurcy Charitable and Educational Trust*

© 2000 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Author, Nelly Silagy Benedek
Designer, Emsworth Design, Inc.
Production, Masha Turchinsky
Editor, Joan Meinhardt

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benedek, Nelly Silagy
Auguste Rodin: the Burghers of Calais: a resource for
educators / Nelly Silagy Benedek.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references
ISBN 0-87099-948-6
1. Rodin, Auguste, 1840–1917. Burghers of Calais—
Study and Teaching (Secondary) I. Rodin, Auguste,
1840–1917. II. Title
NB553.R7 A6327 2000
730'.92—dc21 99-086926

On the cover

Auguste Rodin, French (1840–1917)

The Burghers of Calais

1884–95, cast 1985

Bronze

82½ x 94 x 75 in. (209.6 x 238.9 x 190.5 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gift of Iris and B. Gerald Cantor, 1989

1989.407

CONTENTS

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS	6
INTRODUCTION	9
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY	10
THE STORY OF THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS	11
THE INDIVIDUAL BURGHERS	12
HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION	16
RODIN'S INNOVATIONS	18
BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY	22
DEGAS	24
PHOTOGRAPHY	25
RODIN'S CRITICS	26
CASTING RODIN'S SCULPTURE	27
CHRONOLOGY OF THE ARTIST'S LIFE	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Teachers of various age groups and subjects will find this material useful. This resource will be of particular interest to those who teach language arts, visual arts, European history, art history, and French.

Following are suggestions on how to incorporate this resource into your curriculum using the **New York State Learning Standards for the Arts** as a guideline:

Standard 1: Creating, performing, and participating in the arts

► **Students will develop their own ideas and images through the exploration and creation of artworks based on themes or actual events.** After learning about Rodin's sculpture *The Burghers of Calais*, students may create their own drawings or sculptures depicting a famous historical event or illustrating the idea of heroism. Students may design a work like Rodin's that focuses on humanizing the event or the people portrayed.

Standard 2: Knowing and using arts materials and resources

► **Students will increase their understanding of art by viewing slides and by visiting a museum to see an original work of art.** Teachers may do the classroom activity described in this resource and then follow up with a visit to either The Metropolitan Museum of Art or a local museum or gallery to see an original sculpture. Students may then discuss the differences between viewing slides of a work and seeing the original.

► **Students will become acquainted with art history to understand what is required to become an artist, historian, art historian, and/or art critic.** By learning about Rodin's life and work, students will develop an

understanding of the artist's craft and the skills necessary to create a work of art. They will learn how an artist makes choices and decisions about the form and content of his or her work. In addition to the classroom activity included in this resource, students may write a formal critique of *The Burghers of Calais*, thereby gaining an understanding of how historians, art historians, and art critics formulate their ideas about art and/or history.

Standard 3: Responding to and analyzing works of art

► **Students will explore the meanings, purposes, and sources of a work of art. They will describe their responses to the work and the likely reasons for those responses.** By doing the classroom activity described in this resource, students will both describe what they see in Rodin's sculpture *The Burghers of Calais* and consider the ideas expressed in the piece. After learning the history of the sculpture, they will discuss why and how Rodin chose to render his figures the way he did.

► **Students will describe the visual and other sensory qualities (texture, shape, size, and volume) of a work of art.** By viewing the slides of Rodin's work as well as slides of work by other artists, doing the classroom activity, and discussing Rodin's sculpture, students will be able to describe how Rodin creates movement, texture, and shape, and how he conveys emotion in his piece.

► **Students will explain how the ideas, themes, or concepts in a work of art are expressed in other disciplines, specifically science, literature, and social studies.** In relation to science and photography, students may compare Rodin's sculpture to the stop-action photography of Eadweard

Muybridge. The photographer's images of people and animals in motion mirror the effect of the six burghers' repeated gestures.

Social studies students may discuss Rodin's sculpture in terms of its subject matter. *The Burghers of Calais* is a tribute to six men who were prepared to die in order to liberate the French town of Calais, under siege by King Edward III of England in 1347, during the Hundred Years' War. The sculpture offers Rodin's perspective on what it means to be heroic in times of war. His heroes, however, are not examples of unqualified bravery. They are conflicted individuals exhibiting a range of emotions, including doubt, despair, and confusion.

- ▶ **Using the language of art criticism, students will write analyses and interpretations of Rodin's work.** In addition to doing the classroom activity in this resource, students may research Rodin's work and read critical reviews of his sculpture in books and periodicals. They then may discuss how critics of Rodin's time interpreted his work and compare these responses with their own.
- ▶ **Students will analyze and interpret the ways in which psychological concepts are explored in *The Burghers of Calais*.** By discussing the expressions on the faces of the six burghers, students will attempt to determine which emotions and concepts are explored by the artist as well as their significance.
- ▶ **Students will describe the impact of the work of art on the viewer.** Students will describe the impact of Rodin's sculpture on the viewer through discussions and through the writing exercise described in this resource.

Standard 4: Understanding the cultural dimensions and contributions of the arts

- ▶ **Students will explore the significance of Rodin's piece in terms of its cultural context and will compare Rodin's work to the art of other cultures and/or eras.**

Students may write a short research paper comparing Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* with **public sculptures in their own neighborhoods** that pay tribute to a hero or famous leader. The students may discuss how the artists express the idea of heroism or bravery in different ways or how the depictions of heroism are similar.

Students may compare Rodin's sculpture to works by **Edgar Degas**. Both Rodin and Degas created forms—specifically torsos, limbs, and faces—that they use repeatedly throughout their work. Constructing compositions in this way creates a sense of movement throughout the piece; it also focuses attention on the rhythm of the formal arrangement rather than on a description of a particular event or person.

Students also may compare Rodin's work to the art of **twentieth-century artists**. Discussions may focus on how Rodin's work was innovative in expressing psychological content as well as in experimenting with form.

Students also may discuss Rodin's sculptures in relation to those produced by non-European artists, such as artists from **Africa** and **Asia**. Students may focus how artists from different cultures depict the human figure.





INTRODUCTION

Rodin's sculpture *The Burghers of Calais** consists of six figures standing in various positions and facing in different directions. They stand together on the same level—no figure is elevated above another—wear the same plain garments, and possess similar physiques. However, they all exhibit different facial expressions: sorrow, despair, determination.

This resource will discuss the following questions: Who are these men? What is their relationship to one another? What are they doing? Why are their hands and feet so large in comparison with their bodies? Why are they facing in different directions? Does the sculpture tell a story? Why is it an important work of art?

Students will benefit most from this resource by discovering Rodin's sculpture and its message on their own. The classroom activity is designed for students to study *The Burghers of Calais* before they know anything about the story or Rodin's life. Teachers also may benefit by doing the activity themselves before reading the other sections of this resource.

* The title of the sculpture in French is *Le Monument aux Bourgeois de Calais*.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

BEFORE GIVING THE STUDENTS INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCULPTURE . . .

- ▶ Show the slides of *The Burghers of Calais* to your students and/or display the poster included in this resource.
- ▶ Ask your students to focus on one of the six figures.
- ▶ Have the students closely study the figure they have chosen and then imagine themselves as that figure. Ask them to write an account of their point of view, their thoughts and feelings, based on what they see in the sculpture. Their comments should be written in the first person, as though they were one of the men in Rodin's sculpture.
- ▶ Have the students read their comments aloud, then ask if the other students can guess which figure is being discussed.
- ▶ Compare the comments of students who chose the same figure. How are the observations similar? How are they different? Which emotions does Rodin convey? How has Rodin expressed these emotions?
- ▶ Compare the comments about different figures. Are there any similarities?

The purpose of this exercise is for students to accomplish the following:

- ▶ Articulate their reactions to the sculpture in writing
- ▶ Discover how each student may interpret the sculpture in his or her own way
- ▶ Understand the complexity and variety of the figures' expressions and poses
- ▶ Begin exploring the significance of the piece and, specifically, the relationships among the various figures and the message conveyed by the sculpture in its entirety

AFTER DISCUSSING THE STORY OF THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS . . .

- ▶ After you have discussed the sculpture with your students and told them the story of the burghers, ask them to do the exercise again, this time incorporating the knowledge they have acquired from the discussions.

The purpose of this exercise is for students to see how their responses to the sculpture remain the same or differ once they know the specifics of the narrative.

THE STORY OF THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

In 1885 the town council of the French city of Calais commissioned Rodin to produce a sculpture that would pay tribute to the burghers of Calais, heroes of the Hundred Years' War and symbols of French patriotism.

In 1347, according to the fourteenth-century *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart, King Edward III of England laid siege to the French town of Calais. After eleven months, with the people desperately short of food and water, six of the leading citizens, or burghers, of Calais offered themselves as hostages to Edward in exchange for the freedom of their city. The king agreed, ordering them to dress in plain garments, wear nooses around their necks, and journey to his camp bearing the keys to the city. Although the king intended to kill the burghers, his pregnant wife, Philippa, persuaded him to spare them, believing that their deaths would be a bad omen for her unborn child.

The story of the burghers of Calais appears in the work of earlier artists, most of whom focused on the single figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Rodin, however, decided to include all six burghers. He had read Froissart's *Chronicles* and elected to use the text as the basis for his sculpture.

Froissart describes how each man, a rich and well-respected citizen, announces his intention to offer himself as a hostage to King Edward III. Froissart then writes of the men's departure after removing the fine clothing that would have identified them as wealthy citizens, wearing instead their "shirts and breeches" (undergarments).

Rodin chooses to portray the moment in the narrative when the men, believing they are going to die, leave the city. He shows the burghers as vulnerable and conflicted, yet heroic in the face of their likely fate.

THE INDIVIDUAL BURGHERS

Pierre de Wiessant
(SIDE VIEW)



Eustache de Saint-Pierre

Jean d'Aire

Pierre de Wiessant
(FRONT VIEW)



FRONT VIEW OF SCULPTURE

SIDE VIEW

The council originally had conceived of the sculpture as a monument to Eustache de Saint-Pierre, leader of the group and the most famous of the burghers. Rodin, however, decided to follow Froissart's text as closely as possible and include all six burghers, according them equal status.

The following is an excerpt from Froissart's *Chronicles*:

... the richest burgher in the town, Sir Eustache de Saint-Pierre, got up and said: "Gentlemen, it would be a great shame to allow so many people to starve to death, if there were any way of preventing it. And it would be highly pleasing to Our Lord if anyone could save them from such a fate. I have such faith and trust in gaining pardon and grace from Our Lord if I die in the attempt, that I will put myself forward as the first. I will willingly go out in my shirt, bareheaded and barefoot, with a halter [noose] around my neck and put myself at the mercy of the King of England."

... Another very rich and much respected citizen, called Jean d'Aire, ... rose up and said he would keep him company. The third to volunteer was Sir Jacques de Wiessant [*sic*], who was very rich both by inheritance and by his own transactions; he offered to accompany his two cousins, and so did Sir Pierre his brother. Two others completed the number, and set off dressed only in their shirts and breeches, and with halters round their necks, as they had been told.

John Jolliffe, ed. and trans., *Froissart's Chronicles* (London: Harvill Press, 1967), p. 155, quoted in Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 182

Froissart mentions four of the six burghers by name: Eustache de Saint-Pierre, Jean d'Aire, Jacques de Wiessant, and Pierre de Wiessant. (The other two, whose names are mentioned in a manuscript found in the Vatican Library in 1863, are Jean de Fiennes and Andrieu d'Andres.)

Jacques de Wiessant
(SIDE VIEW)

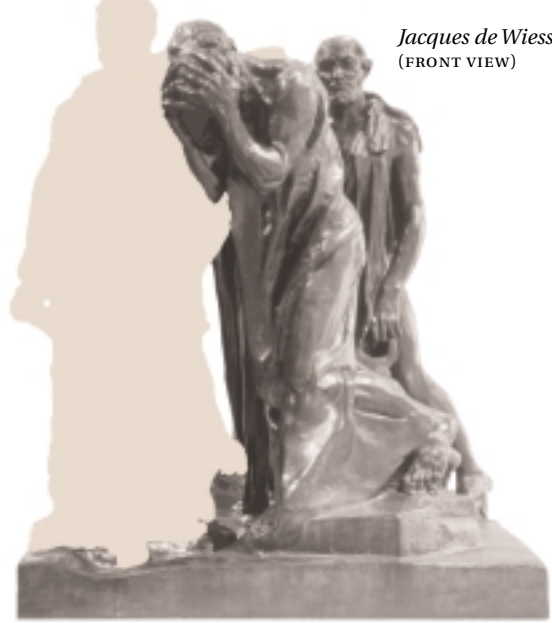
Jean de Fiennes



BACK VIEW

Andrieu d'Andres

Jacques de Wiessant
(FRONT VIEW)



SIDE VIEW

Although Froissart narrates the sequence of events and describes how the burghers looked when they were leaving Calais (dressed in plain garments, wearing nooses around their necks, and bearing the keys to the city), he does not describe their facial features, postures, or specific gestures. Rodin used his imagination to create figures that he believed would be true to the spirit of Froissart's account.

Rodin had models pose for certain parts of the figures, although in the end the figures assumed more generalized types. Auguste Beuret, Rodin's son with his companion, Rose Beuret; the painter Jean-Charles Cazin, a native of Calais who claimed to be a descendant of Eustache de Saint-Pierre; and Pignatelli, an Italian peasant, all posed for the sculpture at various stages. Rodin observed his models' features but modified them in creating his figures. He made

numerous studies of each of the six burghers, first modeling them as nudes and then rendering them as clothed figures. After Rodin had developed each figure individually, he joined them into a single work of art.

Eustache de Saint-Pierre



Eustache de Saint-Pierre is the richest, oldest, and most prominent citizen of the group and the first to volunteer.



Eustache de Saint-Pierre and Jean d'Aire

Jean d'Aire



Jean d'Aire, the second to volunteer, stands firmly in place, his jaw set, holding one of the keys to the city.

Pierre de Wiessant



Pierre de Wiessant, Jacques de Wiessant's younger brother and the fourth to volunteer, turns sideways toward Jean de Fiennes with one arm raised and his mouth open.



Jacques de Wiessant



Jacques de Wiessant, the third to volunteer, has one arm raised and stands behind Eustache de Saint-Pierre



Jean de Fiennes



Jean de Fiennes, the youngest burgher, stands with arms outstretched and mouth open.



Andrieu d'Andres

Andrieu d'Andres buries his head in his hands. His bent posture and enormous hands obscure his face.



Jean d'Aire and Andrieu d'Andres

As a group, the figures convey emotions ranging from pain, hesitation, and doubt to conviction and determination. Rodin presents his "heroes" as complex, conflicted individuals.

HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION

In September 1884 the municipal council of Calais decided to commission a statue of Eustache de Saint-Pierre, the oldest and most important of the six burghers of Calais. The decision was controversial because his role in the drama was unclear. Some accounts reported that he had actually committed treason, collaborating with King Edward III, while others lauded him as a great hero.

In January 1885, based on the submission of a small-scale model, the municipal council chose Rodin to create the monument to the burghers of Calais. The clay maquette, or sketch, showed six figures striding forward, with the figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre leading the group.

The contract signed by Rodin and the mayor of Calais required the artist to present a second maquette before completion of the final work; it was to be one-third the size of the final monument. Typically, sculptors of public works submitted a small model for the approval of the committee commissioning the work. The model usually reflected what the finished product would look like.

In this case the committee was pleased with the first version. Rodin proceeded with his work and in August 1885 offered a second model for review. Because Rodin constantly worked and reworked his pieces, the sculpture had taken on, by this point, a very different appearance. After the committee reviewed the second model the members reported:

This is not the way we envisaged our glorious citizens going to the camp of the King of England. Their defeated postures offended our religion. . . the silhouette of the group leaves much to be desired from the point of view of elegance. The artist could give more movement to the ground, which supports his figures and could even break

the monotony and dryness of the silhouette by varying the heights of the six subjects. . . We feel it our duty to insist that M. Rodin modify the attitudes of his figures and the silhouette of his group.

Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 383

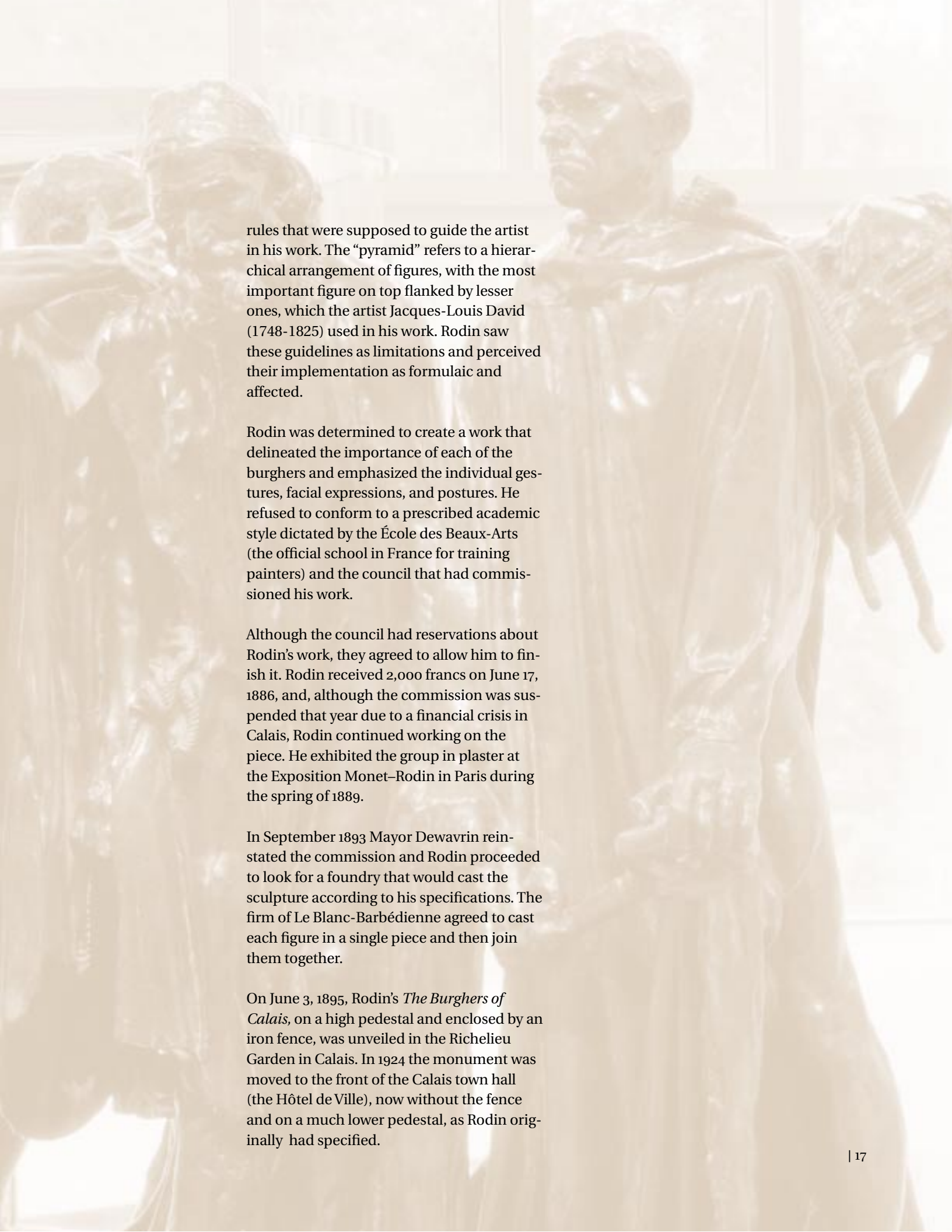
In the first maquette the six figures were elevated on a pedestal, connected by a rope, and arranged striding forward as a group. In the second model Rodin had removed the pedestal and modeled each figure separately. Although they were still on the same level, they now existed as individual figures. From the beginning, the council had not been satisfied with the figural arrangement. Monumental sculpture in the nineteenth century typically assumed a pyramidal structure in order to delineate clearly the most important figure or figures. The council concluded that the separate placement of each figure, all on the same level, rendered the sculpture unacceptable.

Rodin, always quick to respond to negative criticism of his work, wrote a letter to the mayor of the city, Omer Dewavrin:

I read again the criticisms I had heard before, but which would emasculate my work; the heads to form a pyramid (Louis David method) instead of a cube (straight lines) means submitting to the law of the Academic School. I am dead against the principle, which has prevailed since the beginning of this century but is in direct contradiction with previous great ages in art and produces works that are cold, static and conventional. . . I am the antagonist in Paris of that affected academic style. . . you are asking me to follow the people whose conventional art I despise.

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 44

Rodin was addressing criticism that endorsed an academic style intended for all artists. The well-established model for both painting and sculpture provided a series of



rules that were supposed to guide the artist in his work. The “pyramid” refers to a hierarchical arrangement of figures, with the most important figure on top flanked by lesser ones, which the artist Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) used in his work. Rodin saw these guidelines as limitations and perceived their implementation as formulaic and affected.

Rodin was determined to create a work that delineated the importance of each of the burghers and emphasized the individual gestures, facial expressions, and postures. He refused to conform to a prescribed academic style dictated by the École des Beaux-Arts (the official school in France for training painters) and the council that had commissioned his work.

Although the council had reservations about Rodin's work, they agreed to allow him to finish it. Rodin received 2,000 francs on June 17, 1886, and, although the commission was suspended that year due to a financial crisis in Calais, Rodin continued working on the piece. He exhibited the group in plaster at the Exposition Monet–Rodin in Paris during the spring of 1889.

In September 1893 Mayor Dewavrin reinstated the commission and Rodin proceeded to look for a foundry that would cast the sculpture according to his specifications. The firm of Le Blanc-Barbédienne agreed to cast each figure in a single piece and then join them together.

On June 3, 1895, Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*, on a high pedestal and enclosed by an iron fence, was unveiled in the Richelieu Garden in Calais. In 1924 the monument was moved to the front of the Calais town hall (the Hôtel de Ville), now without the fence and on a much lower pedestal, as Rodin originally had specified.

RODIN'S INNOVATIONS



Auguste Rodin's sculpture exhibits characteristics that were innovative for his time and that shocked many of his contemporaries, including the town council of Calais.

► **All of the figures stand at the same level.** Although Eustache de Saint-Pierre, the bearded man, was considered the leader of the group, Rodin does not place him in a prominent position in relation to the other burghers; all the men stand at the same level. Rodin chooses not to use the hierarchical arrangement typical of his time, which called for a pyramidal grouping with a prominent central figure. For the viewer, there is no clear distinction as to which figure might be the leader of the group. All the men are literally and figuratively on equal footing.

► **The six burghers face in different directions.** Rodin constructs his sculpture as a collection of figures that seem randomly

grouped together. Because each one is facing in a different direction and gesturing in various ways, each seems to have his own agenda and individual response to the situation.

► **The sculpture has many focal points.** The piece must be viewed from all sides for one to appreciate it in its entirety. Typically, academic-style sculpture presents a single point of reference; the sculpture has a clear front and back.



► **The hands and feet are proportionally large.** The hands and feet of each figure are large and ponderous, out of proportion to the rest of the body. Rodin communicates the severity of the burghers' situation and, specifically, the weight of their decision by literally weighing the men down, binding them to the ground. They are literally and figuratively burdened by their collective decision to sacrifice their lives. Rodin states:

They are still questioning themselves to know if they have the strength to accomplish the supreme sacrifice—their soul pushes them onward, but their feet refuse to walk. They drag themselves along painfully, as much because of the feebleness to which famine has reduced them as because of the terrifying nature of the sacrifice. . .

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69





► **The figures reveal their vulnerabilities.**

The committee was looking for an expression of unqualified bravery, perhaps a proud, lifted chin, an upright posture, or a look of clear determination. They were certainly expecting the facial expressions of the six burghers to correspond with one another and communicate a single purpose. Instead, each of Rodin's burghers exhibits his own response to his decision, and none of these necessarily conforms to a traditional heroic formula. Eustache de Saint-Pierre is stooped, gaunt, and elderly rather than straight-backed, youthful, and muscular. He seems to hesitate instead of marching forward as the group's leader. Andrieu d'Andres buries his head in his hands as though in despair, and Jean de Fiennes, with arms outspread and mouth open, appears to be questioning the decision. Rodin further explains:

I did not hesitate to make them as thin and as weak as possible. If, in order to respect some academic convention or other, I had tried to show bodies that were still agreeable to look at, I would have betrayed my subject. These people, having passed through the privations of a long siege, no longer have anything but skin on their bones. The more frightful my representation of them, the more people should praise me for knowing how to show the truth of history.

I have not shown them grouped in a triumphant apotheosis; such glorification of their heroism would not have corresponded to anything real.

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69

► **The burghers are dressed in plain garments rather than in fine, expensive clothing that would identify them as leading citizens of their town.** All the men wear simple, nondescript garments, which look like a kind of undergarment rather than the finery that would have identified them as the leading citizens of Calais. Although Froissart's text explains that King Edward III ordered the burghers to dress in plain garments, the council conveyed to Rodin that if he had shown them at an earlier moment in the narrative, they could have been portrayed in more stately, respectable clothing. Rodin, however, chooses to show the burghers when they are leaving the city and look the most vulnerable. He wants them to appear as ordinary human beings en route to a terrible fate.

► **Their facial expressions project complex emotions.** The members of the council were looking for an unequivocal message, that is, a clear illustration of a historical event or an allegory. They expected the figures to communicate a single, unambiguous message. In *The Burghers of Calais* each figure's expression is complex and multifaceted. About this Rodin says:

... I have ... threaded them one behind the other, because in the indecision of the last inner combat, which ensues, between their devotion to their cause and their fear of dying, each of them is isolated in front of his conscience. They are still questioning themselves to know if they have the strength to accomplish the supreme sacrifice. ...

Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*, p. 69

Rodin is describing how each of the burghers has an intensely personal experience even though he is part of a larger group. *The Burghers of Calais* reveals, through gesture and expression, the psychological complexity of each man's decision.

► **Rodin did not want the sculpture placed on a pedestal.** He wanted the figures to be on the same level as those who viewed the sculpture. He stated:

I did not want a pedestal for these figures. I wanted them to be placed on, even affixed to, the paving stones of the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville in Calais so that it looked as if they were leaving in order to go to the enemy camp. In this way they would have been, as it were, mixed with the daily life of the town: passersby would have elbowed them, and they would have felt through this contact the emotion of the living past in their midst; they would have said to themselves: "Our ancestors are our neighbors and our models, and the day when it will be granted to us to imitate their example, we would show that we have not degenerated from it." ... But the commissioning body understood nothing of the desires I expressed. They thought I was mad. . . Statues without a pedestal! Where had that ever been seen before? There must be a pedestal; there was no way of getting around it.

Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 385



BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Rodin's art bridges the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, his work is that of a traditional nineteenth-century sculptor; the historical subject matter and its translation into monumental narrative sculpture are conventional practices of his time. On the other hand, his work points in a new direction for sculpture. Two characteristics of his work—fragmentation and repetition—are new artistic preoccupations that would interest twentieth-century artists who came after him.

In *The Burghers of Calais* each figure is a composite. Rodin created plaster casts of legs, arms, and torsos throughout his artistic career and used the same casts repeatedly in various sculptures. Sometimes a particular hand or foot would recur in his work over the course of decades. He also combined some of the same casts in a single sculpture.

Here, Rodin portrays six individuals who share some of the same features. For example, Jean d'Aire and Andrieu d'Andres have the same head and face; those of Jacques de Wiessant are a slightly different version. Also, the brothers Jacques and Pierre de Wiessant share the same right hand, while all the figures have similarly large hands and feet.



PIERRE DE WIESSANT



JACQUES DE WIESSANT



JEAN D'AIRE



ANDRIEU D'ANDRES

BRIDGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY / DEGAS

Other nineteenth-century artists explored the idea of repeating forms in a single piece to unify a composition and create dynamic rhythms and spatial arrangements. Edgar Degas (1834–1917) composed his figures of dancers, for example, by drawing on a treasury of his own images; sketches, paintings, pastels, and sculptures became the basis for numerous variations on similar themes. Thus, a particular figure could have the head of one model and the torso of another. Degas often would use similar figures, limbs, and gestures in a single work of art.

These combinations would show his dancers as a series of colorful forms in motion rather than as individuals.

In Degas's paintings, as in Rodin's sculptures, the artist builds his own reality rooted in observations of his world and then translated into his own particular vocabulary. Both artists establish their own forms and continuously redefine them so that an arm, a gesture, or a stance takes on a different meaning depending on its context.

Edgar Degas, French
(1834–1917)
Dancers, Pink and Green
Oil on canvas
32 x 29 in. (82.2 x 75.6 cm)
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art
H. O. Havemeyer
Collection, Bequest of
Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer,
1929
29.100.42



In photography, Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) used stop-action photography to record figures in motion. (Rodin was one of the original subscribers to Muybridge’s *Animal Locomotion*, which first appeared in 1887.) Although the photographers’ objective was scientific—to investigate how figures move in space—the resulting images are characterized by a repetition of movements of the same figure.

Although in *The Burghers of Calais* Rodin depicts six different individuals, the similarities among the figures—their height, large hands and feet, plain garments, and, in the case of Jean d’Aire and Andrieu d’Andres, identical facial features—create a visual

arrangement that unifies their actions. The figures illustrate the range of emotional responses a person might exhibit if faced with the burghers’ predicament. Whereas Muybridge shows the same horse and rider in different stages of motion, Rodin presents six different ways one person might respond to a particular situation.

Like Degas, Muybridge, and Marey, Rodin created a dynamic way of portraying the human figure in motion. By repeating forms within a piece he conveys a sense of movement and unity that challenges the traditional academic model. The repetition of figures and forms both heightens the drama of the piece and creates a complex psychological dimension.

For many twentieth-century artists, Rodin's genius lies in his means of representation rather than in the stories he tells. Whereas Rodin perceives his style and technique as a way of conveying a message, many twentieth-century artists see the means or the process of creating as an end in itself.

During the 1930s, avant-garde sculptors began focusing on the importance of an artwork's medium and formal elements. Any narrative or subject matter was considered secondary to the primacy of the forms themselves—the shapes in the piece, their arrangement, and use of space. As the formal elements of sculpture became more important to artists than narratives or allegorical subject matter, many rejected Rodin's work as too rhetorical, too bound to particular narratives, and overwhelmed by clichéd themes and emotions.

During the 1950s, however, art historians such as Leo Steinberg championed the sculptor's role as an innovator, singling out the dynamism and energy of his forms.

In May 1954, Curt Valentin organized an exhibition of Rodin's work at his gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. The bronze sculptures and original plasters revealed the experimental nature of his sculpture and marked the beginning of a revival of interest in Rodin's art.

In 1963 the Museum of Modern Art held a major exhibition of the artist's work. Albert Elsen's important monograph *Rodin* was published in conjunction with that exhibition.

The following characteristics of Rodin's sculpture inspired many twentieth-century artists:

- ▶ *Exaggeration of figural proportions*
- ▶ *Numerous focal points in a single piece*
- ▶ *Elimination of a pedestal*
- ▶ *Lack of a pyramidal structure*
- ▶ *Repetition of forms*
- ▶ *Use of fragments*
- ▶ *Evidence of the sculptor's working process*



CASTING RODIN'S SCULPTURE

Unlike a painting, of which there is only one original, the medium of bronze sculpture allows for more than one cast of the same piece. During Rodin's lifetime the sculptor allowed numerous foundries to cast his work, thus creating a plethora of some works and much confusion as to their authenticity. Some of the casts lacked foundry marks, while others were missing the artist's signature.

In 1974 the Rodin scholar Albert Elsen organized a committee comprising art historians, artists, museum curators, and art dealers that drafted a "Statement on the Standards for Sculptural Reproduction and Preventative Measures to Combat Unethical Casting in Bronze." This document provided benchmarks for authenticating Rodin's work as well as work by other nineteenth-century sculptors. At the same time, it proposed rules to govern the production and reproduction of sculptors' works.

Rodin had given the Musée Rodin the right to cast his sculpture after his death. French law permits the production of only twelve casts of each work by Rodin. In 1956 the French government established these limitations to ensure that the casts were authentic. A 1968 law stated that the first eight casts would be available for purchase by individuals and the last four would go to cultural institutions.

Presently, there are at least eleven casts of *The Burghers of Calais* including the Metropolitan Museum's 1985 cast. The locations of the ten other known casts are:

- ▶ Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel; acquired in 1948
- ▶ Brussels, Mariemont Park; commissioned in 1905–6 for the Warocqué Collection
- ▶ Calais, square of the Hôtel de Ville; the first bronze cast
- ▶ Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek; commissioned by Carl Jacobsen in 1903
- ▶ London, gardens of the Houses of Parliament; purchased by the British government in 1911
- ▶ Los Angeles, Norton Simon, Inc. Museum of Art
- ▶ Paris, Musée Rodin
- ▶ Philadelphia, Rodin Museum
- ▶ Tokyo, National Museum of Western Art; purchased by the Japanese government in 1959
- ▶ Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

CHRONOLOGY OF THE ARTIST'S LIFE

- 1840** November 12, birth of François-Auguste René Rodin in Paris to Jean-Baptiste Rodin, age thirty-eight, and Marie Cheffer, age thirty-four.
- 1854** Enters the Petite École (the École Impériale Spéciale de Dessin et de Mathématiques), a school for the training of decorative artists.
- 1855** Begins modeling clay. Studies at the Louvre.
- 1857** Leaves the Petite École. Fails the entrance exam of the Grande École (École des Beaux-Arts) forfeiting the prestige that the École accords its students. (Graduates of the École received the important commissions for public sculptures.) Works as a statuary mason for various decorators. Employed by the architect Haussmann in his reconstruction of Paris under Napoleon III.
- 1862** Death of his sister, Maria, age twenty-five. Rodin enters the Order of the Fathers of the Holy Sacrament as Brother Augustine.
- 1863** Leaves the Order.
- 1864–65** Studies with the animal sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye (1795–1875) at the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle. Has various decorative art jobs. Meets and begins working for the sculptor Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse (1824–1887). First studio on rue Le Brun. The sculpture called *Man with a Broken Nose* is rejected by the Salon. Meets Rose Beuret (1844–1917), who becomes his companion.
- 1866** Son Auguste-Eugène Beuret is born on January 18.
- 1870** Franco-Prussian War. Drafted into the National Guard. Attains the rank of corporal. Discharged for myopia.
- 1871** Works with Carrier-Belleuse in Brussels. Death of his mother. Has his first exhibition in Belgium.
- 1873** Begins collaboration with the sculptor Antoine van Rasbourgh.
- 1874** Involved in various architectural decoration projects in Brussels.
- The first Impressionist exhibition takes place.**
- 1875–76** Travels to Italy and leaves Rose in charge of his studio in Brussels. Studies Michelangelo's works.
- 1877** Lives in Paris with Rose Beuret. Exhibits *The Age of Bronze*,* called *The Vanquished*. Begins *Saint John the Baptist Preaching* and creates *Walking Man*. *Partnership with van Rasbourgh ends.
- 1880** *Saint John the Baptist Preaching* (which is larger than lifesize) and *The Age of Bronze* are exhibited together at the Salon. The French state commissions *The Gates of Hell*. Creates *The Thinker*. *Finishes *Adam*. *
- 1881** Works on the *Gates of Hell*, *Eve*,* and the *Fallen Caryatid with Stone*. *Exhibits *Adam* and *Saint John the Baptist Preaching* at the Paris Salon.
- 1883** Meets Camille Claudel, who becomes his mistress. She is also his model and works as a sculptor in his studio. Creates *Bust of Victor Hugo*. * His father dies.
- 1884** Moves to a larger studio at 117, rue de Valenciennes. The Calais municipality commissions *The Burghers of Calais*. * Works on the *Gates of Hell* and *The Burghers of Calais*. Submits first maquette for *The Burghers of Calais*.
- 1885** Signs contract for *The Burghers of Calais* commission.
- 1887** Rodin made Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Exhibits *The Kiss* (bronze) and three figures from *The Burghers of Calais* at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris.
- 1889** Joint exhibition of Rodin's and Monet's work at the Galerie Georges Petit. Rodin shows thirty-six works, including *The Burghers of Calais*. The French government commissions *The Monument to Victor Hugo*. First rejection of the Victor Hugo sculpture.
- The Eiffel Tower is completed.**
- 1890** Second rejection of the Victor Hugo project. Rodin works on a third Victor Hugo sculpture.
- 1891** Works on a monument to Balzac.
- 1893** Rodin becomes the president of the sculpture section of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris. The subscription for the monument to the burghers of Calais is renewed, having been inactive since 1886. Rodin's health declines.

- 1894** Travels in the South of France. Meets Cézanne at Monet's house at Giverny. In Calais visits the site of *The Burghers of Calais* monument. Buys a house at Meudon.
- 1895** Moves to his new house, the Villa des Briliants at Meudon. *The Burghers of Calais* is installed in the Place de Richelieu, Calais, on a five-foot-high pedestal.
- 1897** Exhibits plaster cast of *The Monument to Victor Hugo*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquires its first Rodin sculpture, *The Bust of Saint John the Baptist*.*
- 1898** The Société des Gens de Lettres rejects the sculpture of Balzac. Much negative press against Rodin. Ends relationship with Camille Claudel. Exhibits plaster of *Balzac* and *The Kiss* (marble) at the Salon de la Société Nationale, Paris.
- 1900** Opening of the Rodin Pavilion on the Place de l'Alma, near the Exposition Universelle, Paris. Rodin exhibits one hundred and fifty works.
- 1901** Exhibits at the Venice Biennale and at the Third Berlin Secession.
- 1902** Travels to Prague for an exhibition of his work. Meets the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke and the American dancer Isadora Duncan.
- 1903** Named Commander of the Legion of Honor. Becomes president of the International Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers following Whistler's death. Exhibitions in Berlin, London, Venice, and New York.
- 1904** Exhibits large plaster and small bronze of *The Thinker* at the International Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers exhibition, London. Exhibits large bronze of *The Thinker* at the Salon de la Société Nationale, Paris.
- 1905** Rilke becomes Rodin's secretary. Exhibits at the Autumn Salon for the first time.
- 1906** *The Thinker* is placed in front of the Panthéon. Rodin dismisses Rilke as his secretary.
- 1907** Reconciliation with Rilke. Exhibitions in London, Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, Venice, New York, and Budapest.
- 1908** The king of England, Edward VII, visits Rodin at Meudon. Rodin moves to the Hôtel Biron, rue de Varenne. Exhibitions in Berlin, Florence, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Liverpool, and Vienna.
- 1909** Inauguration of *The Monument to Victor Hugo* in the gardens of the Palais Royal.
- 1910** The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquires twelve works by Rodin.
- 1911** Travels to London to choose the site for *The Burghers of Calais*. The French state buys the Hôtel Biron for the Ministère d'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts.
- 1912** The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Rodin collection opens.
- 1913** Camille Claudel confined to an asylum. *The Burghers of Calais* is placed in the Parliament Gardens in London.
- 1914** Rodin writes a book titled *The Cathedrals of France*, assisted by Charles Maurice.
- Germany declares war on France.**
- 1916** The National Assembly votes to establish a Musée Rodin in the Hôtel Biron.
- 1917** Rodin marries Rose Beuret at Meudon on January 29. Rose dies of pneumonia on February 14. Rodin dies on November 17. His funeral is held on November 24. Rodin is buried at Meudon near the grave of Rose Beuret, under the statue of *The Thinker*.
- 1918** The Musée Rodin is officially approved.
- 1924** *The Burghers of Calais* is relocated to the square in front of the town hall at ground level without the fence that had surrounded it at the previous location.

*These works of art may be viewed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For a more detailed chronology, see Miller and Marotta, *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ambrosini, Lynne, and Michelle Facos. *Rodin: The Cantor Gift to the Brooklyn Museum*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1987.
- Butler, Ruth. *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.
- , ed. *Rodin in Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980.
- , Jeanine Parisier Plottel, and Jane Mayo Roos. *Rodin's Monument to Victor Hugo*. Merrell Holberton Publishers London in association with the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, 1998.
- Elsen, Albert E. *In Rodin's Studio: A Photographic Record of Sculpture in the Making*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- . *Rodin*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1963.
- . *Rodin's Thinker and the Dilemmas of Modern Public Sculpture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985.
- , ed. *Rodin Rediscovered*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1987.
- Miller, Joan Vita, and Gary Marotta. *Rodin: The B. Gerald Cantor Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986. Published in conjunction with the exhibition held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 19–June 15, 1986.
- Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Tancock, John L. *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin: The Collection of the Rodin Museum Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: David R. Godine in association with The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976.
- Varnedoe, Kirk. *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990.
- Vilain, Jacques, et al. *Rodin at the Musée Rodin*. London: Scala Books, 1997.
- Vincent, Clare. "Rodin at The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A History of the Collection." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38 (spring 1981).



