



Auguste Rodin, *The Walking Man*, ca. 1880. Bronze. SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by General Art Acquisition Fund.

Rodin & His Legacy

On view in SBMA's Ludington Court beginning May 7

May 8, 2017—Featuring seven sculptures drawn from the permanent collection, *Rodin and His Legacy* illustrates the tremendous impact of the father of modern sculpture, Auguste Rodin (French, 1840–1917). The most influential sculptor of the 19th century, Rodin had an epiphany upon encountering the art of Michelangelo during a visit to Italy in 1876 at the relatively mature age of 36. As he later reminisced to his star pupil Antoine Bourdelle (French, 1861–1929), “It was Michelangelo who liberated me from academism.” In the late work, Michelangelo displayed an unprecedented willingness to distort the human anatomy for expressive ends—a motivation Rodin would receive and further with his own abandonment of the typical 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.



Emulating the Renaissance master's twisting figures as well as the expressive force of his *nonfinito* (unfinished) sculptures, Rodin developed a unique approach to the representation of emotional states as registered through the expressive human body. He 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 *The 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. In the center of this installation stands Rodin's sculpture *The Walking Man*, a striking bronze piece produced from casts of a torso and legs belonging to studies for his sculpture *Saint John the Baptist Preaching*. The artist's choice to concentrate our attention on the physicality of the striding figure, devoid of head and arms, communicates an explosive vitality—a memorable symbol of our embodied humanity.

Michelangelo, *Atlas Slave*, 1525-30. Marble. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.



Rodin's dedication to the human form and the use of conventional materials such as bronze, marble, plaster, and clay reflect his deep respect for the classical tradition. However, his deliberate disavowal of polished execution, affinity for the fragmented figure, and desire to retain the marks of his artistic touch became the hallmarks of his style. With the exception of Antoine Barye (French, 1796–1875), who was one of Rodin's early teachers, and Frederic Leighton (British, 1830–1896), whose work typifies a lingering Victorian attachment to classical finish, the sculptors included in this installation are among the many artists indebted to the master's artistic innovations. Enthusiasm for Rodin peaked around the turn of the century, and even those close followers, such as Rodin's studio assistant Bourdelle, struggled to escape his long shadow. As artists turned to abstraction in the interwar period, the figurative sculptures of Rodin finally appeared old-fashioned.

Auguste Rodin, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1880. Bronze. Musée Rodin, Paris.



Some early 20th-century artists, such as Georg Kolbe (German, 1877–1947), known for his monumental, idealized nudes, remained committed to the figure. Like Rodin, Kolbe depicted the human form removed from the detailed realism and smooth finish typical of the classical tradition. His sculpture *Young Girl*, on display in this installation, depicts the body of an adolescent girl with a charred, ash-like surface, effectively fusing the ideas of youth and old age, life and death. In the period following World War II, a reengagement with the work of Rodin was led by artists such as Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and the female sculptor featured in this installation, Germaine Richier (French, 1902–1959). Richier trained with two of Rodin's students: his studio assistant Louis-Jacques Guiges and Bourdelle. The pitted bronze surface of her sculpture *La Feuille*, 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.

Left: Georg Kolbe, *Young Girl*, ca. 1926. Bronze. SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Otto Jeidels.

Right: Germaine Richier, *La Feuille*, 1948. Bronze. SBMA, Bequest of Wright S. Ludington.

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—an aspect of Rodin's artistic practice that is still evident in contemporary art today.

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