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exhibition review of

Rodin. La main révèle l'homme

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Rodin. La main révèle l'homme. Dessins, photographies et sculptures.
Musée Rodin, Paris, February 7–May 28, 2006

Rodin. La main révèle l'homme.
Hélène Marraud

Paris: Collection Tout L'oeuvre aux éditions du musée Rodin, 2005
80 pp; 100 illustrations (b/w and color); glossary; one b/w photograph
19,50 € (paperback)
ISBN: 2-9014-2885-1[1]

Fifteen years before his death, when his reputation as the most important sculptor of the nineteenth century had been firmly established, Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) analogized the artist and the almighty with the grandiose marble *Hand of God*, 1902 (fig. 1), now one of his best-known sculptures of hands.[2] Rather more obscure and more modest are the hundreds of small, enigmatic hands he crafted throughout his career. Rodin was fascinated by the expressive potential of the hand; he sculpted hundreds, perhaps more, commissioning photographs of them and using them in unique and sometimes odd assemblages. The small but lovingly curated exhibition, *Rodin. La main révèle l'homme*, in the *Cabinet d'arts graphiques* at the Musée Rodin, Paris, showcased a sampling of the works that resulted from the artist's obsession, and the eponymously titled book by Hélène Marraud considers more broadly the hand's impact on his work and his legacy (fig. 2).



Fig. 1, Auguste Rodin, *Hand of God*, 1902. Marble. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [larger image]

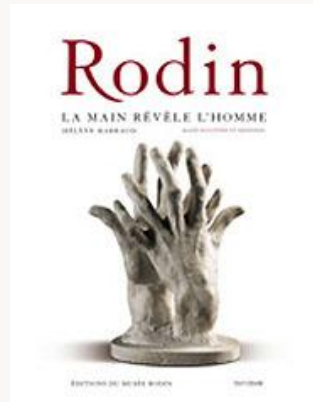


Fig. 2, Book Cover of Hélène Marraud, *Rodin. La main révèle l'homme* (Paris Collection Tout L'oeuvre aux éditions du musée Rodin, 2005). Courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Most visitors would arrive at the exhibition after meandering through several rooms of the museum, which helped to situate Rodin's sculpted hands in the context of his oeuvre. In one of the museum's first galleries, for example, are some of his most famous fragmented figures, such as *The Walking Man*, 1899, as well as the sculpture of *Saint John the Baptist Preaching*, 1880, a photograph of which appears in the exhibition. A selection from the artist's extensive collection of ancient sculpture—including hands—was fortuitously installed along the route to the exhibition, giving the visitor an art historical precedent for Rodin's use of the fragment.

The dim lighting and wine-colored walls of the *Cabinet d'arts graphiques* immediately prepared the arriving visitor for a different sensory experience. The museum's curators utilized the small space to greatest advantage: a large table-top vitrine with letters, books, and images occupied the center of the room; two inset wall vitrines presented most of the sculpture; and photographs and drawings hung on the walls (fig. 3). Elegantly displayed against a burgundy curtain, the dramatic *Large Clenched Left Hand* (fig. 4) stood on a pedestal alongside a white, floor-to-ceiling placard that summarized the didactic intent of the exhibition. For visitors not literate in French, the museum had generously provided an English translation on a small panel by the entrance; the thorough and informative labels that accompanied many of the objects, however, were presented only in French.



Fig. 3, View of installation. Photograph by the author. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Auguste Rodin, *Large Clenched Left Hand*. Plaster. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

The photographs that lined the walls on the right as one entered effectively established the intellectual conceit of the exhibition.^[3] Period photographs of Rodin's first celebrated Salon works, *The Age of Bronze*, 1877, and *Saint John the Baptist Preaching*, and the important commission, *The Burghers of Calais*, 1889, seemed—at first glance—out of place. But the labels tied these sculptures to the larger theme of the show, emphasizing the importance of the "liberated gesture" in Rodin's oeuvre and setting the stage for the presentation of the hand as a legitimately autonomous subject.^[4] Rodin's obsession with the hand seems to have begun in the last decades of the nineteenth century—although even his early Salon works bespeak a fascination with its expressive potential—and later visitors to his studio commented on his loving manipulation of these small works. An English sculptor noted that Rodin would "pick them up tenderly one by one and then turn them about" in the palm of his hand,^[5] and the painter Gerald Kelly remembered the sculptor proudly showing them to anyone who asked to see them, turning the works in the light to reveal their contours.^[6]

The majority of the sculptures in the exhibition were displayed on shelves in the wall vitrines. Only a few were individually labeled and discussed, however; in most cases, they were presented in numbered groups, with a list of titles for each group, so that it was often difficult to match a title to a sculpture. Molded and cast in various materials, oriented in

many directions, upright on molded bases or prone on the glass shelf, the sculptures testified to the intensity of Rodin's fascination. They also demonstrated the range of his production, his self-proclaimed role as nature's "sublime copyist," and his unconventional belief that every part of the body—perhaps the hand most of all—was at least as expressive as the face.[7] The most interesting labels included unexpected descriptions of the works. Visitors were informed, for example, that *Left Hand* (no. 26) (fig. 5) was already considered a work unto itself by 1901 when a terracotta version was mounted and sold, and that *Right Hand* (no. 12) (fig. 6) suffers from a contraction of "intrinsic muscles" that forces the fingers to bend at right angles.[8] The sculptures were displayed alongside an ancient fragment, a bizarre arrangement of a female figure straddling a hand, and poignant agglomerations of hands and faces, such as *Assemblage: Head of the Shade and Two Hands* (dated by Marraud as probably being after 1900).[9] These juxtapositions reveal simultaneously the precedents for and the prescience of Rodin's work, which presaged the sculpture of the twentieth century.



Fig. 5, Auguste Rodin, *Left Hand* (no. 26), ca. 1890? Plaster. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Auguste Rodin, *Right Hand* (no. 12), ca. 1890? Plaster. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Rodin was notorious during his lifetime for severing, re-working, and then re-attaching the body parts of his sculptures—although not necessarily to their "original" bodies. Decades

after sitting for *Saint John*, the model recounted to Henri Matisse that Rodin would walk around the work in progress with a sculpted hand on a peg, trying to determine its orientation on the body.^[10] A photograph in the exhibition by D. Freuler, *Hand of the Burghers of Calais Suspended in the Atelier*, ca. 1885–1886, makes explicit the violence done to the human form in Rodin's oeuvre. Hung by Rodin to facilitate its study, the disembodied hand dangles gruesomely from a scaffold, like meat in a butcher's shop (11 and 14). The morbidity of the image is striking. While situating Rodin's sculpted hands more precisely in the *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth century was outside the purview of this small exhibition, Marraud's book does attempt to address their historical context. She mentions the possible influence of the disastrous Franco-Prussian war, for example, and the reliance on physiognomic theories that linked the appearance of the hand with moral character (61 and 36).^[11] Rodin's extreme fragmentation of the human body, central to this small show, is one of his most influential legacies and awaits a more robust historical treatment.

The exhibition also included three photographs of the *Clenched Hand*.^[12] Taken by photographer Eugène Druet at the end of the nineteenth century, the images were excerpted from a larger series of the painfully arched hand emerging from a sheet, and capture the Symbolist angst that also underlies Rodin's manipulations of the human form. The sculptor consistently commissioned photographs of his works throughout his career, a practice that belied his ambivalence toward, and frequent pejorative statements about, the medium. Druet's images were used to illustrate an article on the hands by Gustave Kahn in a 1900 issue of the Symbolist journal, *La Plume*, edited by writer and art critic Octave Mirbeau and dedicated to Rodin. The curators included the journal in the tabletop vitrine, allowing visitors to see the photographs in context, read part of the article, and understand the role of the photograph in educating the public about Rodin's art.

One of Rodin's great innovations was to exploit the technology of mechanical reproduction to use identical parts in disparate works.^[13] An assemblage called *Two Left Hands (no. 2)*, ca. 1900?, which consists of two plaster casts of *Left Hand (no. 2)* (also known as the *Hand of the Pianist*) facing each other and mounted vertically on a short base, was exhibited on the shelf directly above three separate and smaller copies of it in terracotta, plaster, and patinated plaster. The presentation of these works in close proximity, with their differences in placement, size, and medium, raises the critical issue of replication in Rodin's work. The curators fail to address this issue, but Marraud's text offers a brief discussion of its importance in Rodin's production and its influential legacy (47).

With access to the world's most extensive collection of Rodin's work and the rich holdings of the museum's archives, the curators were able to approach their themes from novel and unexpected directions. The inclusion of two photographs owned by Rodin of Loïe Fuller's hands, for example, suggested the relationship with the American dancer, who astounded Paris at the end of the nineteenth century by dancing in flowing gowns illuminated by multi-colored electric stage lights. The stark contrast of her brightly lit hands against a dark background made them appear surprisingly two-dimensional. Marraud mentions that Fuller also performed an evocative piece called *La Danse des mains* that later inspired works by Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti and Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars, among others (59), which helps explain Rodin's attraction to the dancer's hands.

Letters in the tabletop vitrine shed light on the sculptor's relationships with friends, patrons, and museums. A note of thanks from an artist for the gift of one sculpted hand lay alongside a request from a Swedish Museum for the price of another. Two letters from Rodin's patron Lady Sackville-West revealed specific details about her relationship to his work. She asks the sculptor in a letter dated January 17, 1914 if the *Clenched Hand* is "clenched in horror, [...] anger, [or] suffering"; a note dated three years later, also on display, reveals that she eventually bought this hand for 2,000 francs. While the enigmatic quality of these works clearly confounded the public, it may have also added to their allure for collectors.

The exhibition followed the history of the objects well beyond the death of the artist. A mid-twentieth-century photograph from the Rudier foundry was accompanied by a label explaining that the hands continued to be cast into the 1970s both for collectors and as ceremonial gifts. The surprising artistic longevity of these humble works—originally nothing more than the artist's private meditations—only bolsters the importance of the exhibition. Once again, the detailed and well-researched labels rewarded the curious and diligent visitor.

Marraud's book, *Rodin. La main révèle l'homme*, does not follow the format of the exhibition, nor does it discuss most of the objects on display. Some of the lengthy labels in the exhibition, however, were taken verbatim from Marraud's text. Less than twenty percent of the works in the exhibition are illustrated in the book and those that are were often oriented differently in the exhibition, making them rather difficult to identify except by the keenest observer. The reason for the lack of coherence becomes clear in the exhibition's press release, which states that it was mounted to mark the book's publication.^[14] In other words, the exhibition and the book were conceived separately, the former serving as a sort of advertisement for the latter. The two are, of course, complementary, but the curators could have followed the book more closely in choosing the works in order to make it a more useful resource for the visitor to the exhibition.

Marraud's book joins the *Tout l'oeuvre* collection published by the Musée Rodin, which includes volumes on such varied themes as Rodin's collection of antiquities, *The Gates of Hell*, and the sculptor's relationship to Camille Claudel. The well-illustrated volume is divided thematically, presenting the hand in gesture, as fragment, and "en scène," i.e., as part of assemblages or in photographs. These themes are also represented in the exhibition, though not explicitly. Marraud is at her strongest when she discusses particular works in depth, such as the *Small Clenched Hand*, which was apparently exhibited alone on a pedestal throughout Europe beginning in 1896. The Musée Rodin's incomparable photographic collection enables the author to show the sculpture on exhibit in Prague in 1902, situated among Rodin's most celebrated works. She details later incarnations of Rodin's work and notes the Symbolist literature of the time that treats the theme of the hand, framing the work within the broader artistic and cultural history.

Marraud also makes strong formal connections to art that came before and after Rodin's work. She follows renowned scholar Albert Elsen who attempted to map Rodin's influence on the "partial figure" in twentieth-century art.^[15] By focusing exclusively on the hand, however, Marraud is able to trace the rich and varied history of its image through paleolithic cave paintings, Alberto Giacometti's sculpture, Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of

Georgia O'Keeffe, and the conceptual art of Giuseppe Penone, among many others (4, 17, 34, and 41). In fact, Marraud discusses more works than she is able to illustrate, to the misfortune of those unfamiliar with the history of art. She is bold and incisive in her observations, noting for example, Rodin's reliance on repetition as a formal precursor to Carl Andre's Minimalist floor pieces (48).

Aimed at a general audience, both the exhibition and Marraud's book do a fine job of demonstrating the importance of the hand in Rodin's oeuvre, while the text also considers images of the hand historically, placing Rodin's sculpture in a larger context. Marraud contrasts the "deliberate act" with the "accidental fragment," noting that Rodin's innovations with the fragment are a source of his modernity (27). The sculptor utilized the disembodied hand as an expressive synecdoche for the human figure. *Rodin. La main révèle l'homme* considers this enigmatic aspect of Rodin's vast oeuvre, but there is still much left to discover.

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Notes

My thanks to Gabriel P. Weisberg for his support, Janet Whitmore for her comments, Clémence Goldberger of the Musée Rodin for her assistance, and Raffi Yegparian for his insights—and his patience—as we walked through the exhibition.

[1] A translation of the book entitled *Rodin. Revealing hands* is available for the same price (ISBN 1762 7923). The French edition is reviewed here.

[2] This work was not included in the exhibition, although the wall text alerted the visitor to its presence in the museum.

[3] The numbering of the objects in the exhibition suggested a clockwise-circumambulation of the gallery. I would argue instead for a counter-clockwise tour: Marraud's text is organized this way, and it establishes the context for the exhibition more effectively.

[4] Marraud's book is generously illustrated with myriad photographs of the burghers' hands from various angles (10-15).

[5] Kathleen, Lady Kennet, *Self-Portrait of an Artist: From the Diaries of Kathleen, Lady Kennet* (London, 1949), 42; quoted in Leo Steinberg, "Rodin," *Other Criteria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 339.

[6] BBC Television, *Sir Gerald Kelly Remembers* [1956], no. 4, "Rodin," 8; quoted on p. 50.

[7] Auguste Rodin, "Rodin's Reflections on Art," *Auguste Rodin: Readings on His Life and Work*, ed. Albert Elsen (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 158.

[8] For more on the relationship of Rodin's sculpted hands to specific pathologies, see the exhibition catalogue from the Musée Rodin, *Rodin, les mains, les chirurgiens* (Paris: Éditions du musée Rodin, 1983). The gesture of this hand in particular can be linked to a hysterical contracture; see the author's doctoral dissertation, *Morceaux d'Amphithéâtre: Science and the Sculpture of Auguste Rodin* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, forthcoming).

[9] All dates taken from the exhibition or Marraud's book.

[10] Henri Matisse, "On Rodin" [ca. 1937], *Rodin in Perspective*, ed. Ruth Butler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980) 150. This passage is excerpted from a letter Matisse sent to Raymond Escholier and published in Raymond Escholier, *Matisse Ce Vivant*, (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1956)163-164.

[11] For more on the relationship of Rodin's sculpted hands to physiognomic theories, see the author's "Essence and Evanescence in the *Hands* of Rodin," *Thresholds* 31 (May 2006): 102–109. For more on the relationship of Rodin's sculpture generally to physiognomic theories, see the author's forthcoming dissertation; see note 8 above.

[12] The sculpture in the photograph is usually known as *The Clenched Hand* or *The Mighty Hand*, while the one on the pedestal has also been called simply *The Left Hand*. For more on these works, see Tancock, 616–621.

[13] See, for example, Leo Steinberg, "Rodin," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), especially 353–361.

[14] The press release is available under the heading "Espace Communication" at <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/accueil.htm>.

[15] See, for example, Albert E. Elsen, *The Partial Figure in Modern Sculpture: From Rodin to 1969*, ex. cat. (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1969).

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Auguste Rodin, *Hand of God*, 1902. Marble. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)

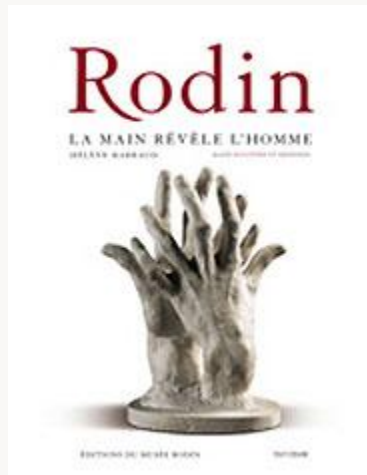


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Fig. 3, View of installation. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Auguste Rodin, *Large Clenched Left Hand*. Plaster. Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph by Christian Baraja, courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



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