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exhibition review of

Matisse & Rodin

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Matisse & Rodin

Musée Rodin, Paris, France

October 23, 2009 – February 28, 2010

Matisse & Rodin

Contributions from Louis Mézin, Dominique Viéville, Claude Duthuit, Nadine Lehni, Marie-Thérèse Pulvenis de Seligny, Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Hélène Pinet.

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Whether or not one agrees that Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was the greatest sculptor at the turn of the century, one cannot deny that he was certainly the most influential sculptor of his day. Every young sculptor in 1900 either wanted to be Rodin or to symbolically obliterate him. By that year, he was a powerful force in the art world, fresh from the success of his private retrospective held at the Pavillon de l'Alma in Paris. Rodin's art was irrefutably the measure by which all contemporary sculpture was being judged. Interest in analyzing his profound effect on modern sculpture has resulted in countless exhibitions, and was seen most recently in *Oublier Rodin? La Sculpture à Paris, 1905-1914*, held last spring at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and in the exhibition to be reviewed presently, *Matisse & Rodin*, held this past winter at the Musée Rodin in Paris (figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1, Publicity poster for *Matisse & Rodin*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Entrance with street sign publicity for *Matisse & Rodin*. Hotel Biron, 79, rue de Varenne, Paris.
Photograph © Caterina Y. Pierre. [\[larger image\]](#)

The careers of Rodin and Henri Matisse (1869-1952), who were more than a generation apart in age, overlapped during the first seventeen years of the twentieth century. Both modeled their sculptures and both were committed to the traditional themes of the nude and the figure in motion. Both came from similar backgrounds and started their careers somewhat late in their lives. Nevertheless, while Matisse's sculptural work has been the focus of recent exhibitions, most notably in *Matisse: Painter as Sculptor* (organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art, The Dallas Museum of Art, and the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2007-2008), the specific and concrete connections between Matisse and Rodin have only recently been given serious consideration. [1] Continuing this line of inquiry, the *Matisse & Rodin* exhibition in Paris set out to re-examine their relationship and find the influences, connections, commonalities and, ultimately, differences between the younger artist and the older leader in the field of modern sculpture.

During Matisse's early career he produced many successful experiments in sculpture, particularly around the years of 1894 to 1918, and he returned to the medium of sculpture throughout his career. While Matisse's sculpture is widely exhibited in permanent museum collections and in temporary exhibitions around the world, it often seems that his sculpture is included in these settings as an idiosyncrasy of his work, or as a rupture in an otherwise solid career as a painter and draftsman. Maybe he believed that himself; in 1950 he was quoted as saying that "I sculpted as a painter, I did not sculpt as a sculptor." [2] Yet, even after he focused more specifically on painting from the 1920s onward, the three-dimensional medium was never far from his mind and appears as a motif in many of his painted works, and a few such paintings were included in this presentation (for example, *Nature morte à la figure de plâtre*, 1906, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Cat. 138).

The exhibition was divided into eight sections and contained mostly bronze sculptures and works on paper by both artists. Wall text, object labels, and an eight-page foldout brochure were presented in both French and English. It began with an examination of the importance of drawing to both Matisse and Rodin. In "La Passion pour le dessin," (*Passion for Drawing*, Section 1), the exhibition began in relative darkness, with almost an equal number of drawings, lithographs and watercolors by each artist, literally organized in parallel with each other, with Matisse's works on the left, Rodin's on the right. All were figurative, and the majority explored the female nude, a continuous subject of exploration for both artists. Also connecting Matisse

and Rodin was their use of line drawing, rather than drawings imbued with heavy modeling and shading; both employed the method of reducing the form to more simple shapes that became a hallmark of modernist art. One of the highlights of this first room was a collection of lithographs by Auguste Clot after Rodin's drawings for Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* (*The Torture Garden*, 1899). With their fine, delicate line and light wash of color, these lithographs were evidently influential to Matisse's work, and he would have known of them, certainly, through his friendship with the lithographer. One of Matisse's untitled pen and black ink drawings, entitled here as *Nu allongé sur le ventre, petit tapis africain* (1935, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Cat. 346) was also displayed and contained wonderful patterns reminiscent of those found in many of his large paintings from the same period.

In 1899, Matisse purchased two works of art from the art dealer Ambroise Vollard: one was a painting of bathers by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and the other was a plaster bust of the journalist Henri Rochefort (1831-1913), sculpted by Rodin in 1884. Matisse made sketches after the bust and his charcoal drawing on vellum (c. 1899, Musée Matisse, Nice, Cat. 46), presents the journalist with a tighter facial expression, but reproduces the rest of the bust very closely. The bust and two drawings after it by Matisse were part of the second section of the exhibition, called "Recontre" (*Meeting*, Section 2). Matisse visited Rodin's studio in the same year, to show the older artist some of his drawings. The meeting was a disappointment for Matisse, because Rodin basically said he didn't work hard enough – actually he said that it looked like Matisse's drawing method came easy to him and that he should try making *pignochés*, or drawings with meticulous details and fussy strokes. Coming from Rodin, who, from the examples of his drawing in the previous room, seems to have done nothing of the sort himself, the comment sends the viewer into shock, as it must have sent Matisse. It does remind one, however, of the familiar adage to never meet your heroes, for you will be disappointed. Matisse thus avoided Rodin's studio in the future, except for a visit to Meudon in 1906.^[3] In fact, Matisse's first sculpture in the round, *Jaguar Devouring a Hare* (1899-1901, Nice, Musée Matisse, Cat. 9), was not something he based on one of Rodin's designs, but instead on the work of the great *animalier* sculptor popular earlier in the century, Antoine-Louis Barye (1795-1875). Its abstract modeling and angular facets had more to do with the work of Cézanne than Rodin. Nonetheless, as the exhibition continued, it became apparent that however disappointing their initial meeting may have been for Matisse, his work did parallel Rodin's own, and the older artists' influence had become central to his early sculptural work.

The use of the live model by the two artists followed in the next room ("L'Approche du Modèle" or *Approach to the Model*, Section 3). Both artists preferred to model their figures from life, and it was in this gallery that Matisse's *rodinisme* was fully exemplified. In quickly scanning the room upon entering it, even a knowledgeable visitor would have difficulty distinguishing the Rodins from the Matisses, so similarly were they molded, cast, colored in brown patina, and focused on the female nude. Rodin's *Le Réveil* (c. 1887, Musée Rodin, Paris, Cat. 91) was clearly the most significant sculpture in the room; the female figure seems to awaken directly from the earth on which she kneels, and from which she rises. Matisse's painting *Nu Bleu, Souvenir de Biskra* (1907, Baltimore Museum of Art, not in exhibition) shares the same pose with the figure in Matisse's own *Nu couché I, Aurore* (1907, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Cat. 127), but while this connection was not implied in the Paris exhibition, it was literally provided in the 2007-2008 Baltimore/Dallas/Nasher exhibition, where the two works were exhibited side by side. Matisse may have seen Rodin's *Le Réveil* in 1900 at the Pavillon de l'Alma, and his similarly titled *Nu couché I, Aurore* reappears in a number of Matisse's paintings, such as *Nature*

morte, bronze à l'oeillet (1908, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, not in exhibition) and *Nature morte au lierre* (1916, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon, Cat. 139). Matisse, however, seems more indebted to Michelangelo's figure of *Night* from the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici as a visual reference for his figure of the Roman goddess of the dawn. One excellent addition to the exhibition that became apparent in this section, where the real exhibition of sculptures began, was the inclusion of foundry names on the labels. This important information, so often ignored in museums, suggests a rich history of foundries that deserves more attention in our field.

The influence of Rodin on Matisse is possibly most evident in the segment of the exhibition called "Autour du *Serf*" (*The Serf in Focus*, Section 4)(fig. 3). This section was well linked with the previous one, as the discussion of models continued. Both sculptors used roughly built Italian models; Bevilacqua, who posed for Matisse's *The Serf* around 1900, is often confused with Pignatelli, who posed for Rodin's *Saint John the Baptist* (1878-1880) and *Walking Man* (1899-1900; fig. 4).^[4] *The Serf* remains Matisse's best known early sculpture, and it clearly has a stance and a pose that evokes a number of Rodin's works including *Saint John the Baptist*, *Walking Man*, *Balzac* (1896, Paris, Musée Rodin, Cat. 74), and *Jean d'Aire*, from the *Monument to the Burghers of Calais* (1886, Paris, Musée Rodin, Cat. 71). Matisse could not have been too discouraged by the older sculptor's dominance because he began exhibiting his sculpture in 1904 at the Salon d'Automne, with the *Serf* and *Madeleine I* thought to have been his representative pieces, and he soon after had exhibitions of his sculptures in Berlin (1908), New York (1909, 1912), and Paris (1913). In this gallery, the curators dealt with the modernist concern of fragmentation. Both Matisse and Rodin had realized, as did other sculptors at the time (Aristide Maillol, for example), that it was unnecessary to represent the entire body to capture a form, a movement, a spirit, or an emotion, a lesson learned through the beauty of accidentally fragmented sculptures from the ancient world. Although the *Serf* was exhibited with arms intact in 1904, its arms were accidentally broken off in 1908; perhaps taking a cue from Rodin's own headless and armless *Walking Man*, exhibited in the Salon de la Nationale in 1907, Matisse had the *Serf* cast in bronze in a fragmentary state. An essay by Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, entitled "Matisse, Rodin, Bourdelle: *Le Serf* et *L'Homme qui marche*" covers this subject quite adequately in the exhibition catalogue.



Fig. 3, Installation View of Section 4, *The Serf in Focus*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris.

[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Auguste Rodin, *L'homme qui marche* (*Walking Man*), before 1899. Plaster. Musée Rodin, Paris. Photograph by Adam Rzepka, © Musée Rodin. [\[larger image\]](#)

The portrayal of movement, motion, and balance in sculpture was an important ambition for early twentieth-century sculptors, evolving from the work of sculptors of the Baroque period. Although sculptures that moved were being produced in Rodin's own time (one notes that Marcel Duchamp produced *Bicycle Wheel* in 1913), motion, and the freedom associated with it, was equally important to more traditional artists at the same moment. (It is interesting to note that running concurrently with this exhibition was *Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), une sculpture vivante* at the Musée Bourdelle, Paris.) The fifth section of the exhibition at the Musée Rodin, therefore, was entitled "La Danse, L'Équilibre et l'Envol." (*Dance, Poise, and Flight*, Section 5)(fig. 5) and focused on the important theme of movement in sculpture. Eight rather fragile-looking plaster and terra cotta dancing figures by Rodin, in arabesque poses and clinging delicately to their visible metal armature, were shown in a long Plexiglas case in this room. A revelation was found here in a drypoint by Rodin of figures dancing in the round (*La Ronde*, 1883-1884, Paris, Musée Rodin, Cat. 213) that strongly calls to mind Matisse's series of well-known paintings of figures holding hands and similarly dancing, a motif that began in the background of *Le Bonheur de vivre* (*Joy of Life*) from 1905-06 and that reappears in his *Dance I* of 1909 and *Dance II* of 1910. Rodin's *Iris, Messenger of the Gods* (1895, cast after 1916, Paris, Musée Rodin, Cat. 196), was tucked in the back of this small section, possibly because her springing into the air provides the viewer with a full view of her pubis, à la Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World*; nevertheless it is an amazing sculpture, truly a tour-de-force of lightness and soaring flight, of which no part touches the ground or the base. It is held up with a single thin rod attached to the base and back of the sculpture. *La Serpentine* (1909, Nice, Musée Matisse, Cat. 234), another of Matisse's key sculptural works, perfectly rounded out this small room of figures in motion, seeming to complete it, stopping its dizzying twirling and twisting of limbs, with a figure finally at rest.



Fig. 5, Installation view of Section 5, *Dance, Poise and Flight*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Also found here were three graphite pencil and watercolor cut-outs pasted to paper by Rodin. Naturally Matisse's own cut-outs from later in the century come to mind, and while a large Matisse cut-out was present in the exhibition, it was at the very end of the show. It seemed a missed opportunity not to display these cut-outs by both artists next to each other. In this room, it would have created a nicer correlation between the two artists' use of "découpage" had Matisse's *Grand Acrobat* (1952, Nice, Musée Matisse, Cat. 248), shown in this section, been exchanged with his *Nu Bleu IV* (also 1952, Nice, Musée Matisse, Cat. 289), shown at the end of the exhibition. Découpage was discussed at the end very briefly, but not in relationship to Rodin's cut-outs, which were made around 1900.

The central and largest room in the exhibition, entitled "La Pratique de la Sculpture" (*The Practice of Sculpture*, Section 6), continued with the thread of fragmentation. Some very nice plasters by Rodin were shown here, including most notably *Génie funéraire* (c. 1898, Musée Rodin, Paris, Cat. 170), which is roughly hewn, lacking much of both arms, scarred with a large gash almost through the entire center of the torso, and with a head that teeters ever so delicately on the neck; if ever there was a sculpture that openly revealed the fragility of life, ever in the midst of death, this is it. Visitors were also presented with all five heads in Matisse's *Jeannette* series (1910-1913), undoubtedly his strongest series of sculptures, which were nicely displayed in a Plexiglas case that revealed them from all sides, and that could be seen in the next room as well. Here visitors were presented with something that Matisse did not seem to borrow from Rodin, that being sculptural seriality and progressive abstraction. Although Rodin certainly duplicated, enlarged, fragmented, reduced, and reused many of his works to make new compositions (I am thinking here of the *John the Baptist* and *Walking Man, Three Shades*, c. 1880, or *Assemblage of Head of Camille Claudel and Left Hand of Pierre de Wiessant*, 1892), he did not take a single motif from his *œuvre* and create a formal series in an effort to reach a more abstract, more straightforward basis of form, as did Matisse. This exploration is continued in "Figures et Dos: Recherche de Simplification" (*Figures and Backs: The Search for Simplicity*, Section 7; fig. 6). If evidence was ever needed that Matisse sculpted like a painter, the series of backs provides such verification. Using the same rectangular field for each of the backs, Matisse worked on reducing the form to column-like solids and curved masses. The four bronze backs, a series conceived in 1909 that continued over the course of two decades, were never cast in bronze or simultaneously exhibited during Matisse's lifetime, so to see them shown together is always an object lesson in modern abstraction. In this exhibition, two of the backs came from casts owned by the Musée Matisse in Nice (*Nu de dos II* and *Nu de dos III*), and

the other two came from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. A torso by Rodin of a seated woman shown from the back (c. 1910-1914, *Torse féminine assis sans tête*, Musée Rodin, Paris, Cat. 256) almost suggests that the influence between the two artists, had, by this point, reversed itself. The plaster for Rodin's *Despair* (c. 1889, not in exhibition or catalogue), a sculpture of a female figure shown kneeling from the back, was nonetheless completed earlier.



Fig. 6, Installation view of Section 7, *Figures and Backs: The Search for Simplicity*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

The show ends as it began, with works on paper under the heading "Découper à vif dans la couleur" (*To Cut Out Vivaciously in Color*, Section 8). This section was very small, and maybe was not originally intended as a section at all, because it was not covered in the catalogue or the brochure. It was, however, the last portion of the exhibition directly before the exit, and it included five drawings by Rodin, one cut-out from Matisse's *Jazz* series, and his *Nu Bleu IV*, as previously mentioned in Section 5. Thus the show ended in a very low-key manner. Yet the idea that making cut-outs was, for Matisse, the ultimate combination of painting and sculpture (as one must "carve" out the colors with a scissors, or as he stated "découper à vif dans la couleur me rappelle la taille direct des sculptures"), was a viable way to conclude the exhibition and led the viewer to the Matisse we know best, a master of color.

While on the whole this was an excellent, rewarding exhibition with many strengths, some flaws were apparent. Firstly, the English press release for *Matisse & Rodin* claimed the show to be devoted to Matisse's sculpture, "an aspect of his work to which no specific exhibition has been devoted since 1975," thus ignoring the Baltimore/Dallas/Nasher exhibition held three years earlier. Also, the wall text and brochure claimed that the exhibition contained "la presque totalité de l'œuvre sculpté de Matisse" ("almost all of Matisse's sculptural work"), and while it was true that examples of his most familiar sculpted works were present, this seemed a slight overstatement. Looking back through the Musée National d'Art Moderne's exhibition catalogue, *Henri Matisse, Dessins et sculpture* (1975), the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition catalogue, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (1992) and the aforementioned *Matisse: Painter as Sculptor* (2007), it seemed that at least sixteen additional bronze and wood sculptures, including very early reliefs, busts and small heads of children, important late abstract heads, such as *Le Tiaré* (*Tiari*, 1930, Museum of Modern Art, New York), figural groups such as *Two Negresses* (1907-1908), and a most *a propos* carved wood sculpture entitled *La Danse* (1907, Musée Matisse, Nice), were not included. Sixteen or so omitted sculptures does not seem like much to complain about, but given Matisse's relatively small overall output in the sculptural medium (he created eighty-two sculptures in total), these missing works make up a large portion of his

sculptural *œuvre*. Finally, there were no plaster sculptures by Matisse presented, and there was scant information with regard to whether such plasters exist, or were just too fragile to be exhibited.^[5] However, according to the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition documentation released in 2007, one learns that "Matisse's original plaster casts were destroyed by his heirs in the 1990s to prevent the production of further editions."^[6]

The exhibition catalogue for *Matisse & Rodin*, however, adds much to the discussion and contains a preface, seven short essays connected directly to the exhibition's themes, and a very useful chronology linking Rodin's and Matisse's careers over a twenty-year period, starting with 1899 when Matisse purchased Rodin's bust of Henri Rochfort and ending with 1919, the year the Musée Rodin in Paris opened to the public. Although not every work in the exhibition is reproduced in the catalogue, a checklist at its conclusion includes a complete list of what was shown. Additionally, a summary catalogue published by the *Beaux-Arts hors-série* (66 pages, 9 €) was also available.

After Rodin's death, Matisse went on to have a very engaging and important career primarily as a painter, influencing countless young artists in his own right. His artistic exchange with Rodin, however, was an integral part of his early career that can no longer be denied or devalued, thanks to this well-composed exhibition. Whether Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Antoine Bourdelle, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Pablo Picasso, or any other sculptors of the first two decades of the twentieth century emulated him or secretly wanted to annihilate his immense personage, there is no denying that Rodin was the father of them all.

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Links:

Musée Rodin, Paris
<http://www.musee-rodin.fr/>

Musée Matisse, Nice
<http://www.musee-matisse-nice.org/>

Baltimore Museum of Art
<http://www.artbma.org/>

Notes

I wish to express my gratitude to the Musée Rodin, Paris and Sandrine Mahaut of Claudine Colin Communication, Paris, for providing the installation photographic views for this review. My research travel to Europe in 2010 was made possible through a PSC-CUNY Faculty Research Award.

[1] In *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), John Elderfield allotted no special significance to the relationship between Matisse and Rodin, and in "Matisse as a Sculptor," *Boston Museum Bulletin* 64:336 (1966): 48-65, Hilton Kramer dismissed it as irrelevant.

The authors of the catalogue for *Matisse: Painter as Sculptor* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), did, however, give scholarly consideration to Rodin's influence on Matisse throughout the text. Most recently, Stephanie D'Alessandro and John Elderfield's *Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913-1917* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), which covers much the same period as the Paris exhibition, does not overstate the relationship between the two artists.

[2] This quote is first found in Georges Charbonnier, "Entretien avec Henri Matisse," (1950) in *Le Monologue du peintre*, Vol. 2 (Paris: René Julliard, 1960), 14-15, and is repeated in other sources such as John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York : The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 46.

[3] Matisse's visit to Meudon is mentioned in the catalogue essay of Nadine Lehni and Marie-Thérèse Pulvenis de Seligny, "Matisse & Rodin," *Matisse & Rodin* (Paris: Éditions du Musée Rodin and Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009), 17.

[4] A brief but concise history of these models and a discussion of who posed for whom is given in an essay in the exhibition catalogue by Hélène Pinet, "Bevilaque et (ou) Pignatelli," *Matisse & Rodin* (Paris: éditions du Musée Rodin and Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009), 85-87.

[5] The *Matisse & Rodin* exhibition brochure in English states that "By moulding his sculptures in a particularly malleable but fragile material, [Matisse] obtained figures in plaster (of which very few, unfortunately, have come down to us) that were then cast in bronze and put in circulation."

[6] <http://www.artbma.org/press/documents/MatisseSculptureFacts-WEB.pdf>

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Publicity poster for *Matisse & Rodin*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Entrance with street sign publicity for *Matisse & Rodin*. Hotel Biron, 79, rue de Varenne, Paris.
Photograph © Caterina Y. Pierre. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Installation View of Section 4, The Serf in Focus. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris.
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Fig. 4, Auguste Rodin, *L'homme qui marche* (*Walking Man*), before 1899. Plaster. Musée Rodin, Paris.
Photograph by Adam Rzepka, © Musée Rodin. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Installation view of Section 5, *Dance, Poise and Flight*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of Section 7, *Figures and Backs: The Search for Simplicity*. Photograph courtesy of the Musée Rodin, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)