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book review of

Rodin by Antoinette Le Normand-Romain

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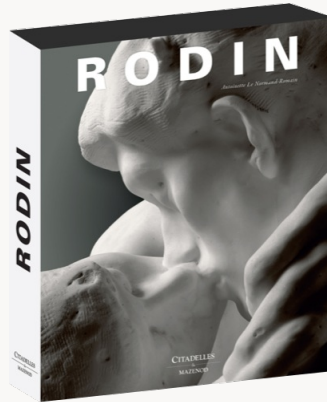
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Antoinette Le Normand-Romain,
Rodin.

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For the last half-century, scholars and critics have devoted countless exhibitions and texts to establishing—and at times complicating—the genius of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), entrenching the artist as the first sculptor of modernity. Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, the former curator of sculpture at the Musée Rodin in Paris and current director of the *Institut National d’Histoire de L’Art*, has been paramount in this scholarly discourse. Her new work, *Rodin*, asserts the artist’s canonical status in a beautiful book that draws on her previous scholarship as well as a wealth of unpublished archival material and brilliant illustrations. With an accessible narrative that investigates the artist’s career, network of connections, inspirations, struggles, accomplishments, and powerful legacy, the text situates Rodin as an icon of the fin-de-siècle avant-garde.

Rodin is the latest contribution to Citadelles et Mazenod’s *Les Phares* collection, which includes monographs on other canonical artists including Andrea Mantegna, Raphael, J.M.W Turner, Diego Vélasquez, and Gustave Courbet. The text, which will also be published in English by Abbeville Press, is geared for a non-specialist audience, but one that is nonetheless familiar with Rodin’s reputation. Rodin scholars will find some of Le Normand-Romain’s argument familiar, but the brilliant images, many of which were not previously accessible in such high quality, and the author’s juxtaposition of Rodin’s two -and three-dimensional oeuvres will still offer scholars a valuable resource for understanding Rodin’s formal processes. Moreover, the wealth of archival material affirms and nuances contemporary understanding of Rodin’s position within the turn-of-the-century French milieu.

The introductory section is representative of the text’s use of conventions about Rodin’s avant-garde development. Specifically, it focuses on the artist’s failure to gain entrance to the

prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts and his early years of struggle. Le Normand-Romain recounts that the artist's lack of financial comfort, resulting in him occupying a frigid studio, led to his first experiments with the sculptural techniques that would define his modern style. Indeed, as his portrait of Bibi cracked in the cold, it became the fragmentary mask of the *Man with the Broken Nose* (1864, cast in bronze 1881, Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, Providence) that Rodin believed set him on the path to future success. In this process, Le Normand-Romain notes how Rodin encouraged connections between this legend and the history of Jean-Louis Brian, a sculptor who froze to death in his workshop after choosing to cover his *Mercury*, rather than himself, with blankets. Despite the acknowledgment of the link between the two artists, the author chooses not to look more critically at Rodin's self-fashioning, which would have resonated well with her later discussions of his use of the Paris Salon.

In the book's first chapter, Le Normand-Romain retells the scandals surrounding the *Age of Bronze* (1877, cast in bronze 1880, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) Rodin's efforts to create *St. John the Baptist* (1878, cast in bronze 1880, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) larger than life size, the circumstances that led him to sculpt his bust of Victor Hugo, and the commissions for public monuments. Yet she reinvigorates the well-known stories by using a series of unpublished correspondences that detail how artists, collectors, and administrators intervened on the sculptor's behalf. While scholars have understood that figures such as Albert-Ernest Carrier Belleuse, Edmond Turquet, and Constantin Ionides were influential in providing contacts and contracts that would help Rodin gain a new social status, Le Normand-Romain's discussion of their letters offers a more specific picture of the relationships Rodin enjoyed with these men. She further analyzes Rodin's exhibition practice, noting that in the 1880s the sculptor used the Paris Salon primarily as a venue for exhibiting portrait busts that established links between himself and the denizens of the Republic, earning him a series of private commissions from collectors, journalists, artists, and statesmen.

The following chapter engages the same 1880s time period, but focuses specifically on the *Gates of Hell* (plaster, ca.1880–90, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and the *Burghers of Calais* (plaster, 1889, Musée Rodin, Paris) Le Normand-Romain's examination of the role of preparatory drawings for the *Gates* is particularly strong. Constant drawing had been a strategy for Rodin since his childhood and he continued his two-dimensional sketches as he was beginning the *Gates* project. Le Normand-Romain demonstrates that many of Rodin's early 1880s efforts showcase his meditations on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but they do not necessarily translate to Rodin's actual modeling of figures for the portal. For these purposes, he sculpted after life, creating maquettes based on models in his studio. These discussions are illuminating in demonstrating how Rodin navigated his interest in Dante along with the other priorities of his project.

At the beginning of 1882, Rodin produced the first sculptural groups and figures that would populate the *Gates*. Le Normand-Romain employs the rich color illustrations to communicate the manner in which the sculptor translated his figures into reliefs for the larger project. For instance, she couples her textual description of a relief of an old woman with a series of revealing images that manifest the sculptor's process of first creating the full figure in the round and then removing parts of it in accordance to its position on the portal.

As Rodin was preparing the *Gates of Hell* in the late 1880s, he was also continuing to work on his commission for the city of Calais that he had earned in 1884. Once again, the beautiful illustrations amplify the analysis of Rodin's process, through which he designed his composition, modeled nude figures, and then draped them in the robes that would be their ultimate costumes. While there is brief mention of the socio-historic context in which Rodin sculpted the *Burghers of Calais*, an avenue that could have been more fully explored, the focus on process is informative, especially for readers less familiar with the technical practices of sculpture in the nineteenth century.

The third chapter of the text centers on Rodin in 1889, opening with a discussion of the *Monet-Rodin* exhibition, the subject with which Le Normand-Romain closed the preceding chapter. She presents the year as the culmination of the first period in Rodin's career where he had achieved a new social and artistic status in France, but was still experimenting formally. In moving towards his modern style, he found himself engaged simultaneously with a variety of visual sources. Nature and the human body were paramount in the sculptor's meditations on modern sculpture. He was famously inspired by antiquity, the Gothic, and Michelangelo, but also drew on the themes of his own period. His treatment of Ugolino, which Le Normand-Romain describes with a very strong analysis, manifests his engagement with contemporary issues, insisting on Rodin's position within a trajectory that included Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux.

In the same period, Le Norman-Romain explains, Rodin explored the possibilities of assemblage and partial figures as part of his exploration on modernity. His *I am beautiful* (plaster, ca. 1885, Musée Rodin, Paris) for instance, spoke to the immediacy and animalistic sensuality of modernity while his use of multiples, as seen in the *The Shades* (plaster, before 1886, Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper) that stand atop the *Gates*, broadened the field of vision and undermined conventions of seeing sculpture. The author notes that the formal and thematic ambiguity in Rodin's multiples, assemblages, and fragments defied traditional understandings of form and finish, creating new ideas about sculpture in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

In chapter four, Le Normand-Romain concentrates on Rodin's invention of a new type of monumentality. Beginning the section with the monuments to Jules Bastien-Lepage (bronze, 1889, Damvillers, Meuse) and Claude Lorrain (bronze, 1892, Nancy), the author highlights Rodin's interest in breaking from staid conventions to communicate through figural dynamism and movement. Le Normand-Romain does not fully integrate Rodin's public programs within the greater culture of *statuemanía*, which only would have amplified her discussion of the sculptor's novel treatment of his subjects' poses, and his design of animated plinths.

Le Normand-Romain raises—and dismisses—fin-de-siècle criticisms of the monument to Claude as she prepares the reader for the chapter's subsequent focus on the studies for monuments to Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. While later celebrated as early modernist masterpieces, both monuments were initially subject to harsh criticism and Rodin executed many plaster versions as he navigated his conception of the men and the demands of the committees. The narratives about these works are well known and often discussed in the literature. Le Normand-Romain's analysis is nonetheless engaging with its use of previously unknown archival sources and, as is consistent throughout the book, superior images that

show the texture and vivacious modeling of Rodin's work in images that add new dimensions to the traditional discussion of his objects.

The following chapter takes a different approach than thematic and period-driven studies of the earlier sections. Here, Le Normand-Romain concentrates on Rodin's plasters and marbles with an emphasis on the artists' sculptural process. She demonstrates the manner in which Rodin's engagement with the materiality of the object was essential, especially in works that employed *non-finito* and fragmentary representations.

In this chapter, which serves as a brief pendant to the author's previous catalogue raisonné of Rodin's bronzes conserved at the Musée Rodin, she stresses the importance of *praticiens* for Rodin's marbles. Though the artist was committed to working in the material, he also refused to do the actual carving, calling on specialists instead. Le Normand-Romain notes that as Rodin's reputation grew and commissions for marble editions increased after 1900, he was paradoxically not as busy as he had been in previous decades; the *praticiens* undertook much of the work. Le Normand-Romain's analysis is powerful as she often recognizes *praticiens* by name, even annotating the images of Rodin's marbles with the name of carver when it is available, a welcome inclusion that will be influential for the growing number of contemporary studies on sculptural editions.

In the sixth chapter, Le Normand-Romain addresses the period of 1895-1900 as a watershed moment for Rodin's avant-garde development. The latter year was the occasion of Rodin's solo exhibition at the Pavillon de l'Alma. Here, the sculptor installed his works as if the exhibition hall was his studio, exhibiting fragments, assemblages, and multiples together with more traditional sculptures, making it a place of study and contemplation rather than one of simple triumph. Among the pieces that the sculptor included for the occasion were *The Earth*, (plaster, 1896, Musée Rodin, Paris) *The Tragic Muse*, (modeled 1895, cast in bronze 1896, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva) *Meditation*, (plaster 1896-67, Musée Rodin, Paris) and *Iris* (modeled 1895, cast in bronze before 1916, Musée Rodin, Paris) A denuded version of the *Gates of Hell* (plaster 1900, Musée Rodin, Paris) figured prominently, as did the much-discussed *Monument to Balzac*, (plaster, 1898, Musée Rodin, Paris) which Rodin installed on the central axis.

In Le Normand-Romain's discussion of what she calls Rodin's avant-garde tendencies, she draws connections with the previous chapters, specifically in noting the significance of the sculptor's work in plaster. In these plasters, Rodin often experimented with the possibilities of fragments and multiples to communicate in unique ways, whether in the seemingly infinite, repetitive possibilities of the *Shades* or the armless and unfinished quality of *Meditation*. Pointing to the stripped down version of the *Gates of Hell*, Le Normand-Romain expounds on the artist breaking the barriers of the sculptural tradition, though she does not fully address the circumstances that led him to exhibit the portal in this manner.

The following section examines the symbolist drift of Rodin's portraiture. In these modern busts, the artist sought to capture the psychological persona of the subject or theme, not just a banal representation of a sitter's anatomy. Le Normand-Romain argues that beginning in the 1890s this new style developed especially in Rodin's efforts to depict those who were specifically important for him, Camille Claudel first among them.

These symbolist busts of the 1890s reflect Rodin's general move towards fragment, assemblage, and the *non-finito*. In the first of these efforts, *La Pensée*, (marble, 1895, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) the sculptor created the link between subject and form by not fully freeing the portrait face from its marble block. The presence of the material, which combines with the concentrated attitude of the face, communicates with a psychological force. Yet, as Le Normand-Romain notes, for all its originality, the composition came about by chance as Rodin seized on the idea only when seeing the sculpture in the middle of the process. The author reveals a number of other sculptures that similarly employ the material for psychological effect, as the model became a simple point of departure for Rodin to explore a variety of concepts.

The public and many of Rodin's sitters found the psychological, rather than directly anatomical, portrait style disconcerting. Georges Clemenceau had a profound dislike for his bust (terracotta, 1911, Musée Rodin, Paris) and Lady Sackville did not see herself in Rodin's portrait of her (marble, 1913–16, Musée Rodin, Paris). Le Normand-Romain again presents the rupture between the viewers' expectations and Rodin's style as a mark of his sculptural liberties that bespoke the psychological and formal ingenuity of his avant-garde efforts. Le Normand-Romain's argument here is very convincing, though a comparison between these efforts and Rodin's 1880s portrait busts, as well with other avant-garde portraiture, could amplify her points.

The final chapter of the book explores nature and antiquity as two forces that are often noted as inspirations for Rodin in his search for eternal beauty. The chapter begins with a section on the collectors and collections of Rodin's art that emerged in the early twentieth century, demonstrating sources of Rodin's legacy. She also uses installation images to good effect, showing a number of early twentieth-century photographs that highlight the juxtaposition of Rodin's sculptures with those of antiquity and nature itself. These intersections lead to a particularly good section on the relationship between Rodin's *Walking Man* (bronze, 1907, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and the fragment and assemblage traditions that he associated with the past.

The final chapter also includes Le Normand-Romain's thoughtful analysis of the drawings and sketches Rodin made after the dancers of the Ballet Royal of Cambodia. The artist was fascinated with the immediacy and natural effects of their movement, documenting their gestures and fleeting poses in drawings and clay models. This section exemplifies one of the strengths of Le Normand-Romain's text in its deep investigation of the artist's two-dimensional sketches—a topic that she has addressed before. In the context of this book, the discussions prove newly revealing as the author's critical examinations of Rodin's drawings engage more profoundly with his sculpted oeuvre, manifesting the relationship between them.

Le Normand-Romain's text is a rich exploration of the career of Auguste Rodin. While the chapters generally follow a chronological path, the thematic approach means that ideas, practices, and circumstances weave throughout multiple sections. This organization can lead to a sense of fracturing and repeating of certain concerns, requiring the reader to follow a series of intersecting threads throughout the book. This method, however, also seems appropriate for a meditation on Rodin's avant-garde career. His efforts on the *Gates of Hell*, for instance, spanned decades and reflected various priorities depending on the moment at which

he was working. The text's structure reflects this pattern, operating best when considered as a total book rather than as a set of individual chapter-length essays.

Throughout the work, Le Normand-Romain repeatedly refers to the complicated relationship between Rodin and Camille Claudel. She suggests that the moments of passion in their liaison corresponded to Rodin's most productive periods. The analysis reflects a developing consciousness about the mutually beneficial liaison between the two artists, revealing a general scholarly transition from past tendencies that marginalized Claudel and her production as entirely dependent on her male counterpart. Nevertheless, the analysis could have been further nuanced in its implication that Rodin's sculptural virility was tied directly to the passion of his love life.

Le Normand-Romain's book affirms Rodin's status as a pioneering modern artist without challenging conventional analyses of his position or oeuvre. To the educated but non-specialist audience, the narrative demonstrates Rodin's avant-garde *bona fides* and insists on his relationship to modernity. For art historians, the book offers new ways of thinking about the dynamics of his two- and three-dimensional oeuvres as well as new archival material. Moreover, as the text juxtaposes portions of Le Normand-Romain's previous scholarship, it sheds new light on tensions that animated Rodin's career, nuancing the construction of the artist as an avant-garde icon. Finally, with its 350-color illustrations, many of which fill a page—or even span two—the book provides a beautiful resource that communicates visually the formal dynamism of Rodin's oeuvre.

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