

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Andrew Eschelbacher

book review of

Les Bronzes Bardedienne: l'oeuvre d'une dynastie de fondeurs by
Florence Rionnet

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017)

Citation: Andrew Eschelbacher, book review of *Les Bronzes Bardedienne: l'oeuvre d'une dynastie de fondeurs* by Florence Rionnet, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2017.16.2.6>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Florence Rionnet,
Les bronzes Barbedienne: l'oeuvre d'une dynastie de fondeurs.
Paris: Arthéna, 2016.
571 pp.; 1300 illus. (200 color and 1100 b&w illus.); bibliography; index.
€140
ISBN: 978-2-903239-58-9

Florence Rionnet's monumental study on the history of the Barbedienne foundry and the bronze sculptures it created between 1834 and 1954 is a timely and vast reference tome. Lushly illustrated and rich with archival research, *Les bronzes Barbedienne* sheds substantial new light on the operations of one of France's most significant foundries in an age when sculptural production increased through its intersection with industrial processes. The Maison Barbedienne was at the center of this phenomenon and Rionnet's book, which includes a catalogue of over 2000 objects, proves expansive in its history of the foundry and in its connections to broader trends of French artistic society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

After a brief preface by Catherine Chevillot, Director of the Musée Rodin, mentor of Rionnet and a scholar who has meaningfully advanced our understanding of nineteenth-century foundries, the author offers an engaging introduction that situates the Maison Barbedienne at the intersection of industrial and artistic practices. She notes that during the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830–48) sculptural editions proliferated and reduced sized casts became a staple of bourgeois interiors. These bronzes were part of a democratization of art, making first-rate sculptures available to a growing middle class of consumers, while also transferring the didactic content of public statues to private homes. Rionnet's assertion of Barbedienne's centrality to this broader story creates important avenues to explore the history of taste and decoration alongside the focused narrative about the foundry itself.

Rionnet's introduction also offers a nuanced juxtaposition of text and image, which will remain a highlight throughout the book. Interspersing prints and photographs of men working in the foundry with images of decorated interiors and beautifully photographed sculptures, the opening pages make a strong visual case for the ubiquity of Barbedienne bronzes in nineteenth-century French society. Indeed, the interplay between a full-page

photograph of Antonin Mercié's *Gloria Victis* and one of Sarah Bernhardt standing in her apartment before a reduced scale cast of Mercié's sculpture is a well-conceived combination.

The body of Rionnet's text consists of three substantial chapters, the first of which contends that the "history of the Maison Barbedienne is, firstly, the history of the men who directed it" (25). This biographical section focuses primarily on Ferdinand Barbedienne (1822–92) before offering far briefer discussions of his successors: his nephew Gustave Leblanc-Barbedienne (1849–1945) and great nephew Jules Leblanc-Barbedienne (1882–1961). Rionnet begins by tracing Ferdinand's personal story from the moment he came to Paris from Auge in western France. The young Ferdinand apprenticed in a saddlery for a brief period, before beginning to work for a commercial wallpaper salesman. Wallpaper—produced in multiples and intended for domestic interiors—became the springboard for Ferdinand's move to bronze sculptures, a career he began after meeting Achille Collas who had famously invented a process for the mechanized copying and reduction of bronzes. While Rionnet's book can seem at times overly adulatory in its praise of Ferdinand, here she rightly emphasizes the importance of his connections with Collas, with whom he opened the foundry in 1838.

Rionnet devotes the majority of her first chapter to Ferdinand's friendship with artists, identity as a collector, position as the head of an industry and reputation as an arbiter of good taste. While she bills the chapter as a history of the three men who directed the company, her overwhelming attention to Ferdinand—nearly twenty pages as compared to barely six for Gustave and only three paragraphs for Jules—marginalizes the founder's successors. For the latter two, she concentrates not on their training or education, but instead on the vast artistic and industrial empire that Gustave inherited and Jules's role in closing the company after the Second World War. Such a heavy weight towards Ferdinand is assuredly fair given his significance for the development of the foundry in an age when he was called "the Hercules of bronze." And more to the point, this imbalance parallels the waning production of the Maison Barbedienne's activities in the twentieth century when bronze editions were no longer at the vanguard of art and industry or consumer taste.

The next chapter focuses on the history of the business rather than its directors and explores the Maison Barbedienne's chronology from founding to closing. A small degree of repetition marks this section as the author retraces some territory previously covered. For instance, although the opening description of the partnership between Ferdinand Barbedienne and Achille Collas examines a different aspect of their relationship, it still retains a sense of familiarity. Despite moments of redundancy and certain organizational quibbles, the narrative in this section is a compelling account of the Maison Barbedienne from its inception as Société A. Collas et Barbedienne to its later iterations as F. Barbedienne et Cie, F. Barbedienne, and finally Leblanc-Barbedienne & Fils.

This chapter commences with the company's origin in 1838 when Barbedienne and Collas started to cast and sell copies of ancient statues. Several years later they expanded their production to modern sculpture and decorative objects. The two men split in 1850, after which the corporation expanded under Ferdinand's direction until his death in 1892. Rionnet argues that in this second period, which she calls the foundry's golden age, the development of the Maison Barbedienne was central to Paris's rise as the apex of the European bronze industry. While other foundries participated in the growth of the trade in the city, Rionnet

suggests that the vast successes and physical expansion of the Maison Barbedienne placed the company at the geographic and commercial center of a massive boom in sculpture production.

Rionnet's detailed description of the processes by which Ferdinand Barbedienne selected sculptures to edition, worked with the State on specific commissions, and chose artists with whom to partner is a strength of this second chapter. Moreover, a passage on the relationship between Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and Barbedienne is a revealing case study, as is the description of Barbedienne's casting of Auguste-Nicolas Cain's animal groups in the Tuileries gardens. These detailed accounts about celebrated fine art sculpture serve as an interesting counterbalance to Rionnet's subsequent focuses on Barbedienne's work in the decorative arts, which included technical experiments and the production of exquisite objects such as the gilt bronze frame of Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse's monumental mirror or the monumental clock at Paris's Hôtel de Ville by Louis-Constant Sévin, Jean-Louis-Adolphe Eude, Tony Noël, and Alfred Serre. As with other recent books such as Claire Jones' *Sculptors and Design Reform in France 1848 to 1895*, Rionnet's analysis exposes the blurred boundaries between sculpture and decorative arts in the nineteenth century, linking figures such as Barbedienne to the societies and movements that exposed a more complicated relationship between the disciplines.^[1]

When Ferdinand Barbedienne died in 1892, he left the business to his nephew Gustave who took over an industrial empire—but not one without noticeable instabilities. Cultural traumas had marked the last twenty years of Ferdinand's life as the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and subsequent Paris Commune (1871), as well as economic stagnations of the fin-de-siècle, hurt the bronze industry. The Barbedienne foundry survived this tumult even as a number of its competitors collapsed. When Gustave took over the company he searched for new avenues to strengthen the business, contracting with artists such as Auguste Rodin, whose reputation would serve marketing purposes, and purchasing the models and reproduction rights for the works of Emmanuel Frémiet. In addition, Gustave built new workshops and expanded Barbedienne's ability to produce large scale bronzes in a flourishing age of public sculptures.

As head of the company, Gustave also rethought the traditional sand casting processes that his uncle and Collas had used in beginning the company. Sand casting had been an important technique as its cost and efficacy allowed foundries to profitably make multiple casts of bronze works with great quality and standardization. In the last years of the century, however, artists took increasing interest in the revitalization of the lost wax casting technique, and Gustave opened a studio specifically designed for that age-old process. Rionnet successfully explains that by offering sculptors the chance to have their works cast through the more complex lost-wax process, the Maison Barbedienne afforded sculptors the potential for more artisanal control over their art in an age when originality and a direct relationship between artists and their objects became increasingly important.

Before ending this chapter with an exploration of the impact of the Second World War on the foundry, which together with market forces and the lack of an effective commercial strategy contributed to the company's 1954 demise, Rionnet introduces a robust discussion of the varied ways by which the Maison Barbedienne exhibited, advertised, and sold its

objects. To do so, she analyses sales catalogues, the sales showroom, and Barbedienne's participation in world's fairs and national exhibitions. This serves as a rich account of the company's commercial activities, and one that could potentially have been expanded into its own chapter through fuller comparisons to competing foundries, which would have added context to Barbedienne's innovations, or by more sustained attention to the reception of Barbedienne bronzes. Rionnet, to her credit, offers plenty of examples of the latter in an appendix at the end of the book.

Throughout all of the topics that Rionnet addressed in her second chapter, her references to men such as the mold maker Désiré Daguet or the founder Victor Thiébaut, along with her selection of archival photographs that showcase the scale of labor—and number of laborers—who made the Maison Barbedienne successful, deserve praise. These efforts continue a relatively new phenomenon in sculpture studies—seen also in Antoinette Le Normand-Romain's massive 2013 Rodin volume or in the work of scholars such as Claire Barbillon, François Blanchetière, and Catherine Chevillot—that highlight the actors responsible for the production of bronzes and marbles.^[2] While the possibility remains that Rionnet could have included further commentaries on specific workers and their tasks—if such information exists in the archives—the current references are strong steps in shining a light on the heretofore anonymous figures who worked in the industry of art.

Rionnet's final chapter focuses on the collection of models that the Maison Barbedienne edited during its 116-year history. The foundry began making copies of ancient sculptures, often ordering models from the Louvre's "*magasin de modèles*" (model shop) to be cast and edited. In addition to reproducing these works, on occasion the foundry would refashion aspects of them to conform better to nineteenth-century tastes. Soon, the firm engaged contemporary artists who eagerly took advantage of the possibility to expand their reputation and earnings by creating editions and leveraging foundries' growing consumer markets and distribution networks. Ferdinand Barbedienne, for instance, made his first contract with a contemporary sculptor when he signed an agreement with François Rude to create editions of the *Young Neapolitan Fisher* in March 1843. Contracts such as this became central to the expansion of the Maison Barbedienne business, as did timely purchases of a number of collections from artists' estates. In securing models along with the rights to reproduce them, the Barbedienne foundry was able to cast and sell numerous posthumous bronzes created by revered sculptors such as Antoine-Louis Barye, Emmanuel Frémiet, and Camille Claudel.

In addition to selecting prized Salon pieces or public monuments, the Maison Barbedienne worked with sculptors to tailor objects specifically for editions that conformed to market tastes. Any alteration to existing sculptures was part of a negotiation between artists and the company, and the details reveal some of the complicated legal questions that these partnerships raised. In addition to issues of quality and precision, artists and foundries navigated intricacies of copyright law, the number of casts that could be made, and the exclusivity of rights to reproduce the works. Moreover, the foundries—like the artists—had a vested interest in fighting against international counterfeiters. Rionnet addresses these issues by treating numerous court cases and industry disputes in which the Maison Barbedienne participated. Moreover, she rightly draws our attention to the significance of organizations

such as the *Réunion des Fabricants de Bronzes* (founded in 1818 and detailed in chapter one), which helped to regulate the commerce between artists and industrialists.

Rionnet's inquiry into the thematic and formal choices that motivated Barbedienne's selection of bronzes is among the most fascinating sections of this chapter. Her analysis is probing as she contrasts Ferdinand Barbedienne's relative conservatism and taste for academic-style bronzes with the choices of his competitors such as Susse Frères and Siot-Decauville—and even that of his successors. Moreover, her discovery that Maison Barbedienne's most popular subjects were Napoleonic themes and those that focused on Joan of Arc suggests a deep and complicated intersection of aesthetic taste, business, and cultural politics in the tumultuous nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

On a number of occasions Rionnet astutely referenced Catherine Chevillot's scholarship in ways that advance her study. Other scholars, too, are at times mentioned in the body of the text, but the success of the extended engagement with Chevillot's arguments in this section suggests that more sustained interaction with the specific contentions of Jacques de Caso, June Hargrove, and Elizabeth Le Bon, among others, could have equally expanded her case. While certainly not the point of her book, a deeper focus on Pierre Cadet's book on the Susse Frères foundry, for instance, may have amplified Rionnet's comparative investigation of the Maison Barbedienne and its competitors.

Following a brief conclusion, Rionnet presents an extensive catalogue of edited models as well as a series of annexes that include a chronology, annotated reference list, and display of foundry stamps and marks. Rionnet clarifies that the catalogue is not exhaustive, though it is extensive, containing references to 1576 sculptures, 299 notices about decorative art objects, and 208 monuments. This is a remarkable resource, which the author compiled through tremendous archival research focused on contracts for editions signed between the Maison Barbedienne and sculptors, sales catalogues, and the registers of the foundry's awards. In addition to being impressive in its depth, this is an eminently useful catalogue. In fact, in the process of reviewing the book, I have already used this resource on a number of occasions while investigating objects in the collection of my museum.

Les bronzes Barbedienne is an essential source for scholars of sculpture as well as those interested in art and industry and the history of taste. It provides a well-grounded and necessary biography of Ferdinand Barbedienne, and a convincing argument that he and his foundry were central to the development of French art in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the detailed catalogue and discussions about process support the growing concentration of sculpture scholars interested in object-based inquiries and technical examinations. A more discretely divided series of chapters or a more tightly organized chronological arrangement of the material might have ensured more narrative fluidity. That said, given the extent of archival research and the wealth of detailed information, Rionnet's organization of such vast content into a coherent story is still a distinct success.

As a last note, the beauty of this tome and its extraordinary compendium of images merits recognition. The photography itself is commendable and the thoughtful combination of full-plate images and object details allows for sustained examination of Barbedienne's bronzes. This is the style of presentation that scholars have come to expect from Arthena

publications, and this work certainly matches that standard. Yet such a marriage of a stunning visual presentation with astute scholarship and editorial heft comes at a high price (though one that seems somehow more reasonable in comparison to the number of similarly priced art history books with limited color plates), and *Les bronzes Barbedienne* is most likely to be found in institutional libraries or in the private homes of sculpture collectors. Regardless of its cost, however, the quality of production and analysis is worthy of high praise.

Andrew Eschelbacher

Susan Donnell and Harry W. Konkler Associate Curator of European Art, Portland Museum of Art

aeschelbacher[at]portlandmuseum.org

Notes

[1] Claire Jones, *Sculptors and Design Reform in France 1848–1895: Sculpture and the Decorative Arts* (Burlington, VT and Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014).

[2] Antoinette Le-Normand-Romain, *Rodin* (Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 2013).