

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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Rodin's Family: The Intersection between Myth and Reality

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 1 (Spring 2021)

Citation: Pascal Griener, "Rodin's Family: The Intersection between Myth and Reality," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.1.2>.

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

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Abstract:

Once his reputation began to grow, the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) turned his attention toward his self-image. In particular, Rodin established an artistic lineage in which he presented himself as the dual heir to Michelangelo and Dante, two of the leading figures of Italian art and literature. This article demonstrates that Rodin's identification with an artistic genius and a prophetic poet can be understood not only as part of a trend in artistic circles during the nineteenth century but also as a direct consequence of his own upbringing and family background.

Rodin's Family: The Intersection between Myth and Reality

by Pascal Griener

... what gives Energy, I think, is the aim given to us by Pride. . . Pride has been for me the most potent aid of Genius; all of our great figures were full of pride.

- Auguste Rodin

Once Auguste Rodin's reputation as a world-renowned sculptor began to grow, he turned his attention toward enhancing his self-image.[1] He penned his first autobiographical sketch in 1883 to feed journalists with relevant data on his life.[2] In it, Rodin emphasized that being rejected by the *École des Beaux-Arts* had been an opportunity rather than a drawback because he had never had to perform academic drills; instead, he learned art free from constraints—to the extent that he says almost nothing about the great artists of the past who had inspired him. His preoccupation with his self-image grew rapidly, and by 1908 he began lobbying for the creation of a Rodin museum, realizing that his fame could be increased by means of an institution devoted to the conservation of his works, collections, papers, and even furniture. On November 18, 1916, when Rodin was seventy-six years old, his dream became reality: the French Parliament passed a law to establish a museum, to be housed in the Hotel Biron in Paris, as well as on Rodin's property in Meudon. To this day, it remains the largest artist's museum in the world.[3]

In addition to planning a monument to himself, Rodin also established an artistic lineage in which he presented himself as the dual heir to Michelangelo and Dante, two of the leading figures of Italian art and literature.[4] This refashioning of himself as a nineteenth-century genius in the mold of two great icons triumphed in Rodin's *L'Art* (1911), a series of dialogues with journalist Paul Gsell (1870–1947). The volume proved an instant success and had a great impact on several subsequent monographs devoted to Rodin.[5]

Michelangelo and Dante were cult figures during the nineteenth century. Michelangelo, in particular, exemplified the bold and free genius, who had liberated himself from all rules at an early age.[6] For Rodin, who was proud of having been excluded from the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the Florentine artist was an attractive model. Rodin must have discovered Michelangelo in the Louvre, where the two famous *Slaves* took pride of place; he could also admire plaster casts after the Medici tombs in the Palais des Études at the *École des Beaux-Arts* (fig. 1). In 1876, he traveled to Florence to visit the Medici tombs in situ. His fascination with Michelangelo grew to the point that he came to believe that he could communicate with him: “. . . this great magician allows me to know some of his secrets.”[7]



Fig. 1, Anonymous photographer, *Cast Collection of the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris: Plaster Casts after Original Sculptures by Michelangelo for the Medici Chapel, Florence*, state at the time of Rodin, 1919. Photograph. École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the École des Beaux-Arts. [\[larger image\]](#)

As for Dante, Rodin worshipped him as much as Michelangelo. *The Divine Comedy* (1320) presented a tragic, often brutal vision of humanity that struck a chord with many readers in the nineteenth century.[8] Dante was widely seen as the consummate model of the poet who acted as a spiritual guide to the world. When he became very famous, Rodin came to imagine himself as a kind of leading light of his time. The idea was not original: Victor Hugo had already presented the vision of a national poet—himself!—who could act as a sage, a prophet leading France and its citizens toward a radiant future.[9] Rodin, who was very fond of Hugo, nurtured the poet's ambition: the poet "is, as Dante said about Virgil, [the people's] guide, their lord and their master." [10] Rodin believed that Dante, in turn, had taken over the role of guide from Virgil, and that artists like himself could fulfil this lofty function in modern times.

In this article, I intend to show that Rodin's identification with artistic genius and the prophetic poet can be understood not only as part of a trend that became fashionable in artistic circles during the nineteenth century, but also as a direct consequence of his own youth and family background, in both industry and the letters. Several members of his family left the artisanal world to earn a living in industry and commerce. These men and women shared a deep nostalgia for traditional handwork, although they knew that they had to embrace the new technologies involved in industrial production. As we shall see, the figure of Michelangelo allowed Rodin to hide his own new, complex model of artistic creation in the industrial world behind the image of a traditional manual artist of great stature. However, another part of Rodin's family thrived in the field of letters. And while his own father had little formal education, the young Rodin, like many children from a poor background in the nineteenth century, took his education into his own hands. Reading and learning on one's own was seen as the only way to social emancipation; for young Rodin, poets and writers were like leaders and prophets, who mastered all the mysteries of language and who could show the people the path to the future.

The Social Context of Rodin's Early Years

Rodin's father and mother came from the French provinces. Like a large number of French citizens during the first decades of the nineteenth century, they left their hometowns to seek employment in Paris. At that time, the capital offered plenty of work, although the salaries were generally very low. During the first five decades of the century, Paris doubled in size, breaching the one million mark in the 1840s.[11] Auguste's father, Jean-Baptiste, came from Yvetot (Normandy), where his family was active in the textile industry.[12] Auguste's mother, Marie, was from the province of Lorraine; her family worked in textiles in the Mosel region.

In his superb monograph, Carl B. Frey proves that the Industrial Revolution caused considerable unemployment and human distress in the first half of the nineteenth century, impacting families like the Rodins.[13] Mechanical looms were becoming increasingly common in textile factories; they were first used in Great Britain and then spread throughout Europe. The new looms increased productivity, making it possible for producers to sell their goods at a lower price. Faced with this brutal, cutthroat competition, factory owners who had eschewed mechanization were obliged to hire lower-wage workers; they otherwise faced ruin. Many workers, and even their bosses, soon fell into deep financial misery. Many abandoned their trade; accepting their fate, they sought another profession. Others, like Rodin's parents, left their provinces; they may have felt uprooted from their homes, but they had no choice other than to invent a new life in a large city like Paris.

Both Rodin's father and mother belonged to these uprooted social groups who were forced to readjust to life in Paris. Jean-Baptiste managed to land a lowly job as a *surnuméraire* (supernumerary employee, on par with today's office temp) in the Paris police force. Rodin's devotion toward his father can be felt in his first ambitious sculpture, which depicts his father, an exacting man who would often reproach his son for not being tough enough (fig. 2).[14] The bust, in the form of a herm, transforms the lowly bureaucrat into a figure on a par with a Roman senator. In reality, Jean-Baptiste could barely scrape together a living. When Auguste was born in 1840, his father's salary amounted to one thousand francs per year, a very low income at that time according to statistics. Jean-Baptiste managed to climb up the hierarchical ladder, albeit very slowly.[15]



Fig. 2, Auguste Rodin, *Bust of Jean-Baptiste Rodin*, 1860. Bronze, Rudier cast, 1917. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[larger image\]](#)

There were several main stages of Rodin's father's rather uninspiring career. On June 30, 1827, he was appointed *garçon de bureau surnuméraire* (supernumerary office helper) at the Préfecture de Police de Paris (the Paris police department). His responsibilities were limited—if any civil servants in the department fell ill, he had to pick up their workload and uncompleted tasks. For this he was paid the miserable sum of five hundred francs per year. Less than one year later, on April 23, 1828, he was appointed to a position at the prison of Saint Denis; his new job offered a considerably better salary of eight hundred francs. One year later, there was another change when, on May 27, 1829, the Préfecture de Police offered him the position of *surveillant* (warden) at the Conciergerie prison, near Notre-Dame de Paris, with another pay raise, bringing his annual salary to one thousand francs.

Over the coming years, however, he paid dearly for this modest pay raise: he was shifted from one office to another, from one job to another, and even suffered a pay cut along the way. From the Conciergerie, he was moved, on May 7, 1830, to the second bureau, fourth division at the Préfecture, where he was a *garçon de bureau* (office clerk); the job was certainly not a promotion, as his salary was reduced by one hundred francs and, to add insult to injury, he was not even paid from the central state budget, but from an auxiliary budget (the *fonds du personnel des voitures de place*, or the taxi-staff fund). More than seven years later, still earning the same salary, he was transferred on September 7, 1837, to the third bureau, first division. He later moved to the first bureau, second section on April 13, 1840, with a small increase in salary—he once again earned one thousand francs per year.

After twenty years of struggle in lowly and low-paid jobs, he finally got a real promotion. On February 18, 1848, the prefect of Paris granted him the title of police inspector with—at long last—the much-coveted status of civil servant (*inspecteur sédentaire au 3ème bureau de la 1ère division*) and an annual salary that reached the height of 1,200 francs. Above all, Jean-Baptiste could for once count himself lucky. Only four days after his promotion, on February 22, revolution broke out in Paris. The administration ground to a halt and routine paperwork was pushed to the side, either to be abandoned entirely or delayed for many months.

However, Jean-Baptiste's promotion had been approved—the paperwork had been completed and signed—and so he started his new job at the beginning of the new regime.

Over the next few years, and especially during the Second Empire under Napoleon III, the administration valued this faithful policeman, who had served under a number of different monarchs and governments. On January 26, 1853, he was promoted to the job of inspector in the first bureau, first division, and was then transferred to the corps of the municipal police (second bureau, third division) on the same salary, 1,200 francs per annum. He clearly settled in well and quickly made a place for himself in the department, since, on March 22, 1853, and then on January 24, 1855, he was given pay raises—to 1,400 francs and then to 1,500 francs. This was to be the highest point of his career, the pinnacle of his time in the Paris police force. Unfortunately, he did not have very long to enjoy even this small victory and this paltry pay check. Little more than six years later, in 1861, he requested early retirement, beset as he was by serious mental problems. His employer accepted his request and he was awarded a small pension.

His final salary, before he retired, amounted to 1,500 francs per year. A meager sum, especially for a man who had three children to feed.^[16] In comparison, a teacher in a secondary school (*lycée*) in the provinces who had passed the state exam (*agrégation*) and was a mid-ranking civil servant earned twice as much as Jean-Baptiste, or three thousand francs per year. In Paris, a teacher in a secondary school earned five thousand francs per annum.^[17] Even a good mechanic in a factory could earn as much as two thousand francs annually.^[18] Jean-Baptiste had inched his way up the career ladder in the municipal police, hesitantly and at a painfully slow pace. It would appear that he was not even protected or favored by his superiors; it is also clear that his education, and in particular his poor writing skills, greatly hampered his career prospects. As a result, Jean-Baptiste gave to his son some solid moral values, but he was not an adequate role model for his son's ambition.

Rodin's Education and the World of Letters

I shall now analyze how Rodin became acquainted with the world of letters, the greatest figure of which, in his view, was Dante. Rodin's view on literature in general owed much to his early experience with his education in poor circumstances. Jean-Baptiste had dreamed of a bright future for his children. He had wanted to offer a basic, but sound education to his son, Auguste. Unfortunately, he could not afford the cost. He therefore decided, in 1848, to place his son in the capable hands of the Frères de la Doctrine Chrétienne (Brothers of the Christian Doctrine), also called the Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes (Brothers of Christian Schools).^[19] The congregation ran a primary school at 32, rue Neuve St. Etienne du Mont (now 10, rue Rollin) in Paris.^[20] The brothers offered free schooling, and their primary beneficiaries were the children of poor parents. They wanted to further popular education but also to give their pupils a strong moral and religious upbringing.

At this time, the bourgeoisie was not inclined to support the education of the masses, for fear of contributing, unwillingly, to their emancipation. François Guizot, a minister for public education in 1833, declared to the French Parliament that "Intellectual development alone, if separated from moral and religious development, becomes a source of pride, of insubordination, of egoism and [is] therefore a danger to society."^[21] In other words, the

working class had to be kept in check. The brothers taught in French, not in Latin, and emphasized inculcating basic, hands-on knowledge after the first primary cycle, to children aged nine and beyond. This type of education should have appealed to Auguste, who did not seem to have been overly fond of abstractions. However, he did not feel at ease in this environment, and his father removed him from the school in 1849, before he completed primary school and could thus take advantage of the practical courses programmed for the advanced students. Auguste might have learned some very basic skills from the brothers, such as reading, which was taught before writing in their school—unusual in France at this time. However, their methodology did not benefit the young Rodin.[22]

It is also possible that the 1848 February Revolution caused some disquiet in French Catholic schools. The new minister for public education appointed by the revolutionary government was Hippolyte Carnot, a rabidly anticlerical Republican, who quickly pushed through legislation to force the dissemination of Republican propaganda in all schools, including Catholic establishments. This declaration of war alarmed the clergy, as well as Rodin's father, Jean-Baptiste, who remained deeply committed to his Catholic religion.

Following his time with the brothers, the young boy did not go to school for two years. His father hesitated about his son's education and then, in 1851, finally decided to send him to the town of Beauvais, to a small but "safe" boarding school directed by his own brother, Jean-Hippolyte Rodin, who had spent his career as a teacher and preceptor. At a relatively young age, Jean-Hippolyte had founded his first boarding school in Breteuil-sur-Noye in 1829; his own son Hippolyte, Auguste's cousin, was born there in 1829.[23] This first establishment closed down soon after, and Jean-Hippolyte was forced to find a paid teaching job. He found a post in the municipal collège (middle school) in Beauvais.[24] In 1834, he also took on the charge of municipal librarian; the two employments could easily be combined, since the library was housed in the same building.[25]

Jean-Hippolyte taught at the Collège de Beauvais for many years, but he could never abandon his dream of once again opening his own boarding school.[26] In 1850, he decided to take the plunge: he resigned from his post and found a house for his school in the rue du Tournebroche, in the historic center of the city.[27] Auguste was one of his first pupils; Jean-Baptiste placed him in the institution from 1851 to 1853. The cost of such an education was no doubt a considerable financial challenge for Jean-Baptiste, although it is very likely that his brother offered him a significant rebate on the school fees. As mentioned above, Jean-Baptiste did get a promotion and a pay raise in the closing days of the July Monarchy, and this must have offset, to some extent, the cost of his son's education. Additionally, the Rodins' third child, Anna, died at that time. Her death must have shattered the family—but it nonetheless reduced their financial burden.

It is fascinating to observe the differences in the cultural outlook and interests of the two Rodin brothers, Jean-Baptiste and Jean-Hippolyte. Jean-Hippolyte's world was firmly rooted in a bookish culture and his son, Hippolyte, would later publish several highly regarded scientific books. Jean-Baptiste, on the other hand, could not be further removed from this literary culture. He could hardly write, and his letters are full of egregious mistakes. In around 1855, he penned a short text of advice for Auguste on a single sheet of paper; it casts a

brutal light on the shortcomings of the writer. Rodin's father exhorts his son to work, to educate himself:

[your future] needs to be built on solid foundations, durable ones that cannot crumble in the winds of the most frightening storms, and your work needs at some time in the future to be passed down to posterity, and that one day in the future one can say about you, as about these great men, the artist Auguste Rodin may well have died but he lives for present, future, and yet to come prosperity. It is thus that after death one lives. It is thus that History makes you live in the centuries to come. Courage Courage *[sic]*![\[28\]](#)

The poor man toiled to translate his jargon into written French, relying on phonetic approximations—a true sign that he struggled to write even a few words. At that time, 35 percent of the French population could not write even simple letters, and only 54 percent of the male population could boast of their ability to both read and write without difficulty.[\[29\]](#)

It is probably in Beauvais that Rodin first came to love literature and books. However, his stay in his uncle's boarding school was not a great success. Auguste was very nearsighted, a defect that was only detected much later. For a number of years, it hampered his ability to read. He also suffered from some form of dyslexia; this too cannot have helped his intellectual development.[\[30\]](#) But he had a very bright mind, combined with a formidable appetite as an autodidact. He could memorize conversations and oral exchanges of ideas. Throughout his life, he made superb use of these talents. He read slowly, but this handicap never diminished his passion for books. This was aided by the recent decrease in the price of books, as well as new series published for workers who were eager to cultivate themselves and better their lives.

Business and Applied Arts

The other side of Rodin's family was particularly active in the world of applied arts and industry. This fact, too, had a great impact on Rodin as an artist, because the applied arts were going through a great period of upheaval. The young August witnessed this crisis firsthand. His mother, Marie Cheffer, had a sister named Thérèse. She bore three sons, Auguste's cousins, who later worked in the fields of typography, commercial engraving, and stationery.[\[31\]](#) Emile Eugène Cheffer, one of her sons, became a very good engraver; his son, Henry Cheffer, went on to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and later became famous for his work as an engraver of postage stamps for the French state.

On his father's side, other relatives were also active in the fine metal industry. One of Jean-Baptiste's sisters, Marie-Désirée, married Jean-Stanislas Coltat, whose family owned a sizeable business. Since 1838, they had sold religious jewels and ornaments under the trademark "A Notre-Dame des Victoires" from their premises in Paris at 84, rue d'Enfer, and later at 42, rue Vavin (fig. 3), as well as their shop in Lourdes, an important destination for pilgrims during the nineteenth century.[\[32\]](#) They employed not only commercial staff, but also quite a few craftsmen, who worked in their production department. The company prospered and grew rapidly during the Second Empire. They made use of an extensive network of influential and eminent contacts in the religious community—priests, congregations, and monasteries advertised their wares.[\[33\]](#) The company produced medals,

crucifixes, rosaries in all shapes; individual customers could purchase items in their shops, but the Coltats also sold goods in bulk to other retailers. From Coltat in Paris, one could order “gothic” or “Renaissance” medals, as well as modern ornaments in gold, silver, copper, or even in less traditional metals, like nickel silver or aluminum. The business was known for its high-quality craftsmanship combined with a very good command of the most modern production techniques in the light metal industry.[34]

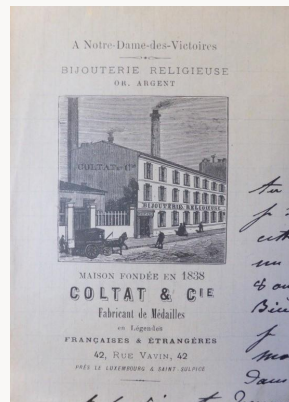


Fig. 3, Anonymous, “A Notre-Dame des Victoires,” Letter from Hippolyte Marie Stanislas Coltat to Auguste Rodin, Paris, January 10, 1891. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[larger image\]](#)

The Coltat family cultivated very reactionary beliefs and remained deeply Catholic; for example, they never gave up on the idea of seeing the Bourbons restored to the French throne. As late as the end of the Second Empire in 1870, they were actively campaigning for Henri V de Bourbon, Comte de Chambord, one of the pretenders to the throne.[35] They yearned to see a Bourbon king of France again. This wish did not seem entirely in vain in the years just after 1870. The Third Republic struggled to assert its legitimacy; one of its presidents, Marshal General Patrice de Mac Mahon, Duke of Magenta (1879), openly advocated the return of the Bourbons. A major obstacle was the inability of the Bonapartists, Orleanists, and Legitimists (pro-Bourbons) to agree on a single candidate who could lead the assault on the republic. As a result of this dissension, the Republicans managed to impose their law almost by default.

In a similar vein, the Coltats railed against the nefarious effects of capitalism, a force that, in their view, was destroying all forms of craftsmanship. At this time, France was experiencing an industrial boom. They strove for the restoration of corporations, the traditional structure presiding over the production of goods during the Ancien Régime, since they believed that these bodies kept high-quality craftsmanship alive, while also furthering Christian values among workers. The head of the family, Jean-Stanislas, signed a petition requesting an official decree to reinstate the corporations on December 2, 1877.[36] Of course, the request for a decree of this sort was not taken seriously into consideration by the government. However, the Coltats’ struggle betrays a real sense of desperation, in addition to a total ignorance of the flow of history. They feared that in their sector, as had already occurred in other trades, future technical developments would drive workers out of their jobs. After all,

the industrialization of the textile industry had already caused untold damage to the employment market.

What is clear is that the terror of industrial capitalism hovered over the Rodin-Coltat family, casting its shadow over them. Throughout his life, Auguste Rodin would denounce the ill effects of industrialization; his friends confirmed that he would wax lyrical about the beautiful former world inhabited by craftsmen who fostered and nurtured their splendid traditions until the upheaval caused by the French Revolution: “those who practiced during our admirable eighteenth century knew the fundamental laws of their trade . . . whereas all of the more or less pretty works that are created by means of industry, rather than by art, do not withstand the march of time. They are sterile because they age very quickly and are not useful for anyone.”[37]

Auguste Rodin's mother, Marie Cheffer, tried to eke out a living by selling (together with her daughter Maria) religious and devotional objects, like those sold by the Coltats. They peddled medals, rosaries, and other such items. Their commercial strategy was simple: they purchased these objects wholesale from Coltat, no doubt at a preferential rate because of the family ties. They, in turn, sold those products at attractive prices to several shops specializing in religious goods in various parts of France. Whenever she traveled to visit members of her family, Maria, Auguste's sister, would seek to secure new clients. She made calls upon shops, showed her range of goods to the shop's proprietor, and then attempted to draw them in by pointing out that they were being overcharged for similar objects by their usual, but unscrupulous, agent.[38]

In January 1862, Maria discussed her future with her family. She was hesitating between three paths. First, she could opt for marriage. If not, she could run a shop selling religious objects, most of which would be supplied by Coltat. Auguste promised to support her financially if she decided to start a business of this kind. Alternatively, she could enter religious orders and become a nun.[39] Maria was a clever young woman with a strong will, but she showed growing inclination toward a religious life. At last, she decided that this was her vocation, and she took the veil.[40] However, her decision would prove fatal. An epidemic ravaged the religious institution that she entered just a matter of months after her arrival. In December 1862, Maria died. This had a great effect on Rodin, who had always worshiped his loving but exacting sister, whom he had long considered to be a kind of guardian angel for him. Thereafter, he slumped into a deep depression.

Another of Jean-Baptiste's brothers—one of Auguste's uncles—Jacques Alexandre, seems to have found an intellectual path. According to most Rodin biographies, he was a professor, although there no evidence for this assertion. The only detail that we know for sure about him is that he was a *rentier* (independently wealthy) and had enough funds to invest in industrial pursuits. In 1852, he co-founded a company named Houzelot et Rodin, based at 75, boulevard Montparnasse in Paris.[41] His associate, Etienne François Houzelot, was one of the best metal engravers in Paris at that time and owned several patents in his field.[42] He made religious medals and engraved portraits, and, in 1848, he even started to produce a series of medals bearing the effigy of the protagonists of the recent revolution.[43]

Houzelot recognized the importance of history for the industrial arts. In 1838, he petitioned the government to establish a museum devoted to the Middle Ages and to the Renaissance; he claimed that it would offer a source of inspiration to modern craftsmen.[44] The July Monarchy was receptive, as they were very keen to encourage the progress of industry. Five years after Houzelot's petition, in 1843, the government purchased the Sommerard collection and created the famous Musée de Cluny in Paris.[45] Cluny prefigured the foundation of the Museum of Decorative Arts, the doors to which were commissioned from Auguste Rodin in 1880—the famous *Porte de l'Enfer* (Gates of Hell).

Thus, Rodin grew up in a milieu that was full of good craftsmen who acknowledged the importance of mastering the history of the industrial arts, and who were able to cast a retrospective outlook on their historical development. All his life, Rodin remained passionately interested in the history of artistic crafts. From his family's trade, he was aware that religious art produced in factories involved a considerable amount of technical research; age-old techniques such as engraving, gilding, and cloisonné were still in use, but these ancestral practices were complemented by the aggressive use of recent technologies or of new materials, like electrolysis or aluminum.[46] The Poussielgue-Rusand company, for example, was held in great esteem for that very reason.[47] Rodin was fond of showing how much he admired traditional techniques, although he made extensive use of the most modern materials and technologies. In many ways, his family aided him greatly in this willingness to articulate tradition and modernity.

Artist or Artisan? Conflicting Images of the Professional Sculptor in the Rodin Family

In 1854, the Rodin family enrolled Auguste in the Petite École, a drawing school. It was a very good decision, since this establishment trained young artists who had talent in the industrial arts.[48] It is essential to understand this decision to orient the young Rodin toward the decorative arts, which had the full blessing of Jean-Baptiste. Rodin's father despised artists who worked in the fine arts traditions; he compared them to do-nothings.[49] In a note that he wrote for his son, appropriately titled "Sur ton travail" (About your work), Jean-Baptiste urges him to be more energetic—he hates what he calls "poires molles" (literally, soft pears, that is, weak characters), an image that recurs quite often in his letters. Through sheer will, he says,

one arrives at one's aim, and one becomes a worker unlike the others, unlike his colleagues, one is the pathfinder and the man who reveals his talents and who in this way, increased threefold by his hard work, earns four times as much as he would have otherwise; and can easily offer himself a comfortable [life], and if afterwards he has a family he knows how to make himself and his family happy, because one does nothing without money.[50]

Jean-Baptiste uses the word *ouvrier* (worker) with respect. He hoped that his son could become not just any worker, but an outstanding one. Very clearly, he understood that his son's career prospects were in line with those of a typical qualified worker, who could hope to feed a family on his salary. In another set of advice written for his son, quoted at length above, he outlined a grandiose vision of the artistic genius: I want, he says, "that one day in the future one can say about you, as about these great men, the artist Auguste Rodin may

well have died but he lives for present future and yet to come prosperity [*sic*]. It is thus that after death one lives. It is thus that history makes you live in the centuries to come.”[51]

Rodin's father had no clearly defined idea about artistic careers; but it is true to say that at that time the status of the industrial arts had gained some prestige. French industrial artists and designers enjoyed an international reputation. In Paris, a good worker in the field of the applied arts could earn a fair living, with a salary vastly superior to that of a police inspector.[52] Ceramists, such as the Renaissance artist Bernard Palissy, became the subject of enthusiastic biographies, over the course of which they were extolled as great geniuses on a par with artists like Raphael.[53] The memoir written by Benvenuto Cellini met with much success, because it mixed dramatic episodes with vivid descriptions of Italian courts. Tellingly, the French translation of this text was not dedicated to a French craftsman but to the sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye, one of Rodin's teachers.[54] Nonetheless, craftsman were still differentiated from fine artists. Rodin's father, however, did not grasp such subtleties; his young son was probably not quite aware of the distinction, either. Nowhere is this more clear than in the two portraits that Charles Hippolyte Aubry created of his friend, the young Rodin, in 1862, when Rodin was in his twenties. These images offer two distinct and contrasting visions of the young artist: in one, he presents Rodin in the guise of a bourgeois, and in the other of a manual worker (figs. 4, 5).

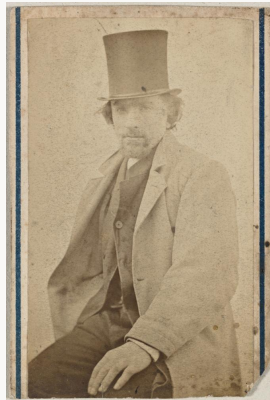


Fig. 4, Charles Hippolyte Aubry, *Auguste Rodin in Top Hat*, ca. 1862. Photograph on albumen paper. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[larger image\]](#)

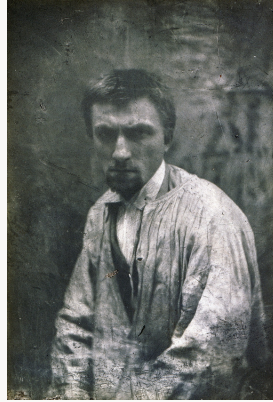


Fig. 5, Charles Hippolyte Aubry, *Portrait of Auguste Rodin in Overalls*, ca. 1862. Photograph on albumen paper. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Rodin's family shared most of the received ideas and prejudices that the bourgeoisie entertained toward fine artists. His uncle Jean-Hippolyte—the head of the small boarding school in Beauvais—showed some respect for young people who sought a career as craftsmen. However, in a letter to Jean-Baptiste, he stated that a craftsman has to be excellent; not even a glowing recommendation could possibly hide a worker's mediocrity from a prospective employer. As for artists—and here, Jean-Hippolyte probably thought of young Auguste—"I recommend that before making a great artist of oneself, one should aim at something positive; for one needs to be able to live before being famous, and all too often fame and glory are but smoke, without substance."^[55] This judgment is brutal, but the whole family would have subscribed to it.

By the 1890s, however, Rodin's family's attitude had changed. Even distant relatives, who may well have considered that the young Auguste was mad when he embarked on a career as a sculptor, suddenly realized that Auguste Rodin had become a well-known name. Shamelessly, they begged him to send them a photograph "with in addition a little dedication written by you, that would please me a lot, here—just as elsewhere—people know who you are but doubt that you are my cousin, and that is an honor that I should like to be able to prove."^[56]

Conclusion

Revisiting Rodin's early years enables us to understand the complex origins of his appropriation both of Dante and of Michelangelo. As seen above, Rodin was the son of a lowly and uneducated bureaucrat, whose administrative career stalled early on. Jean-Baptiste's siblings managed to fend much better for themselves in two different fields—the world of letters and the industrial arts. Both of these areas would have a profound impact on Auguste's upbringing and outlook on creativity once he had attained fame as an artist.

At a time when popular education and autodidacticism through books were hailed as progress and as a way toward social emancipation, Auguste tried to compensate for his lacunary schooling by reading any book that he could buy or borrow. His sister Maria complained about her “brother who is often working on Sunday and is deep into his books and statues [*sic*].”[57] Later in life, Rodin remained fascinated by men of letters; to him, they resembled superior beings, like spiritual guides, who could master the world of words and of meanings, a realm that seemed highly desirable yet so far out of reach to him.

Nonetheless, Rodin could not resist the temptation to try his hand at composing a great poetical volume: *Les Cathédrales de France* (The cathedrals of France; 1914).[58] The various versions of the manuscript betray Rodin's struggle with words. He endlessly scribbled sentences on hundreds of small sheets of paper, some no more than fragments torn from a page. The meaning of these sentences is often so obscure that it remains impenetrable, for example, “Are they some clouds who are like attacks or like lies [*sic*]? One has the impression that it is finished, but it reappears, more true, like a high mountain [!]”[59] Rodin was fond of weird metaphors, and he believed that the defining characteristic of poetical discourse was its dense, obscure language. He could not organize these fragments into a coherent whole and, in the end, most of the text that was published was completely revised by Charles Morice and at least three other authors.[60] One of the men of letters involved, art historian Louis Gillet, described this daunting task in the following terms: “I have read the beautiful fragments that you have sent me. . . . I imagine that I am a scholar who has been asked to edit an ancient text which would have survived in the form of fragments, written on papyrus which is half burnt.”[61] Yet, in spite of his failings as a writer, Rodin believed that he could come to be seen as a modern Dante. The *Gates of Hell*, which embodies his entire artistic output, directly betrays his ambition to create an epic poem in sculpture (fig. 6).



Fig. 6, Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917. Plaster. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée d’Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

However, Rodin's identification with Michelangelo was of capital importance for him, even at a time when new industrial methods challenged the traditional techniques of art making. As seen above, the Industrial Revolution had ushered in a new world, one in which countless artisans fell victim to progress—the French Revolution had destroyed the corporations and sculpture underwent a transformation.[62] As a young boy, Rodin lived in a family that had

experienced at firsthand the conflict between traditional craftsmanship and modern industry. Perhaps as a result, he often bemoaned the decline of the old traditions of craftsmanship, though in practice he never hesitated to exploit the most recent techniques developed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.[63] He relished the fact that mechanical processes enabled him to reproduce, in different sizes, a three-dimensional original form. He made extensive use of photography and relied heavily upon the division of labor.[64] As for his clients—from Joseph Vitta to Maurice Fenaille and Samuel Pomeroy Colt to Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemysza—most had made their fortunes from the very same world of industry that Rodin so redoubted.[65] Yet, like his relatives, he was nostalgic for a past when sculpture was the product of the hands of an artist; he was proud to underline that he was a traditional craftsman as much as a modern artist.

Borrowing the cloak of Michelangelo allowed Rodin to stress the autographic character of his creations, at the same time that industrial techniques and the complex division of labor were combining to render this dimension questionable in the field of sculpture. A strange episode reveals that Rodin's friends, especially those who had helped him to found the Rodin museum, were all too aware of this problem. The second curator of the Rodin museum (after the artist himself) was Léonce Bénédite. In reality, Bénédite took charge of the institution almost from the outset, the old Rodin being too ill to manage the museum. In 1916, Bénédite asked the "practician," or marble carver, Paul Cruet to make a cast of Rodin's right hand. The artist's mind was nearly gone by that time, and he was probably not even aware that he was being "cast." Cruet was asked to affix a miniature torso to the palm—a female nude that Cruet copied after a figure in a group by Rodin, *Aurora and Tithonus* (1906).[66] The resulting small sculpture was a complete fabrication (fig. 7); nonetheless it was given to the friends of the museum and presented as a work made by Rodin. In paradigmatic fashion, it staged the close relationship between the hand of the artist and his plastic creations.



Fig. 7, Paul Cruet (and others), *The Hand of Rodin*, 1917. Plaster. The National Gallery of Art, Washington. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of The National Gallery of Art. [\[larger image\]](#)

The same year, an assistant working for Rodin, the Russian Seraphin Soudbinine, carved the third version of *The Hand of God or the Creation* in marble (1916–18; fig. 8). The statue glorifies God as the Great Sculptor of the world. Rodin left large parts of the work deliberately unfinished in order to show that, like Michelangelo, he had produced unfinished masterpieces. The plaster model had been created by Rodin himself in around 1896 and,

between 1906 and 1918, it was translated into marble three times by his assistants. Ironically, the last of the three versions was not completed until after Rodin's death. All three versions give the viewer the impression (the illusion indeed) that the shape of the hand and of the naked body have been carved directly into a rough block of stone by Rodin himself.^[67] Together with Michelangelo, God was invoked by the artist, and by his friends, in order to highlight the autographic character of Rodin's own works in traditional, preindustrial terms.



Fig. 8, Séraphin Soudbinine (after Auguste Rodin), *The Hand of God or the Creation*, 1916–18. After an original in plaster [n.d.] by Rodin. Marble. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[larger image\]](#)

Rodin's identification with Michelangelo and Dante are powerfully rooted in his youth. Born into a poor family, he could see that other branches of his family were much more successful in the field of letters and in the world of the industrial arts. His artistic production, and especially the *Gates of Hell*, bear witness to his desire to become a kind of poet and prophet, on a par with Dante. As for his appropriation of Michelangelo, its purpose was to erase a fundamental issue of artistic practice in the age of industry: the degree of its autographic character. At a time when the division of labor and mechanization had become the norm in sculpture, as in the industrial arts, Rodin's workshop produced several sculptures in marble mostly executed by assistants; but their *non finito* was reminiscent of Michelangelo's unfinished masterpieces.^[68] They bore very visible traces of the chisel, because only these marks could ever glorify a creation made by the unique, unmistakable hand of a genius.

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Notes

This essay was written at the Musée Rodin, Paris, where I was professor in residence in 2019. I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Catherine Chevillot, chief curator and director of the Musée Rodin, as well as to Véronique Mattiussi, chief of the archives and library at the Musée Rodin, for their very precious guidance; as well as Sonia Christon and Sandra Boujot, librarians at the Musée Rodin, who shared their exceptional knowledge of the collection during my residence.

[1] On the history of nineteenth-century sculpture in France, the following publications were of great importance to my research: Claire Jones, *Sculptors and Design Reform in France, 1848 to 1895: Sculpture and the Decorative Arts* (London: Routledge, 2017); Josef Adolf Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth, *Rodin-Studien: Persönlichkeit—Werke—Wirkung—Bibliographie* (Munich: Prestel, 1983); *Metamorphoses in XIXth Century Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975); Véronique Mattiussi and Raphaël Masson, *Rodin* (Paris: Flammarion/Musée Rodin, 2016); *Le Livre du centenaire*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2017). On the historiography of the period, see Roland Recht et al., ed., *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2008).

Epigraph: “. . . la cause de l'énergie je crois c'est le but que nous a montré l'orgueil. . . l'orgueil pour moi a été la plus puissante aide du génie, nos grandes figures ont toutes été orgueilleuses.” Autograph note made in pencil by Auguste Rodin, at an unknown date, on the reverse of a letter written by his sister Maria Rodin to her mother Marie, Paris, [July 1, 1862], box Rodin/Cheffer, Archives of the Musée Rodin, Paris [hereafter AMR].

[2] Marion J. Hare, “Autobiographical Notes by Rodin in a Letter to Gaston Schefer, 1883,” *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 17, no. 2 (1990): 158–62; with regard to the analysis of Rodin's family, I do not agree with most of the conclusions drawn by Maxime Paz, “L'Autobiographie de Rodin: Une fiction?,” unpublished manuscript, 2014, Université de Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, <https://hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/documents/file/5-Paz-Rodin.pdf>; on biographies of artists in the nineteenth century, see Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Catherine Sousloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[3] On the history of this museum, see Catherine Chevillot, ed., *Le Musée de Rodin: Dernier chef-d'oeuvre du sculpteur* (Paris: Artlys, 2015).

[4] Auguste Rodin, *L'Art: Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell* (Paris: Grasset, 1911), 128, 237, 255, 266, 286 (Michelangelo), 209, 227 (Dante). This book was hugely successful.

[5] The mixing up of facts and fiction started very early. See, for example, Judith Cladel, *Rodin: L'Homme et l'oeuvre* (Brussels: Van Oest, 1908); and Judith Cladel, *Rodin sa vie glorieuse et inconnue* (Paris: Grasset, 1936). One of the rare monographs on Rodin's life that is convincing is Mattiussi and Masson, *Rodin*.

[6] *Rodin and Michelangelo: A Study in Artistic Inspiration*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997); Mehdi Korchane, Alain Bonnet, and Laure de Margerie, eds., *Michel-Ange au siècle de Carpeaux* (Milan: Silvana, 2012); Sara Vitacca, “Un mythe à l'oeuvre: La réception de Michel-Ange entre 1875 et 1914” (PhD diss., Université de Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 2018).

[7] “ce grand magicien me laisse un peu de ses secrets.” Letter from Auguste Rodin to Rose Beuret, Rome, [March?] 1876; published in Alain Beausire and Hélène Pinet, eds., *Correspondance de Rodin 1860–1899* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 1985), 33–34. On the plasters after Michelangelo at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris at the time of Rodin, see Emmanuel Schwartz, “Du plâtre et de la poésie: Les Moulages d'après Michel-Ange à l'École des beaux-arts de Paris,” *In Situ* 28 (2016), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/insitu.12411>.

[8] Michael D. Garval, *A Dream of Stone: Fame, Vision, and Monumentality in Nineteenth-Century French Literary Culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004); Aida Audeh and Nick Havely, eds., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Aida Audeh, “Dante in the Nineteenth Century: Visual Arts and

National Identity," *La Parola del Testo* 17, no. 1–2 (2013): 85–100; Eugenia Querci, ed., *Dante vittorioso: Il mito di Dante nell'Ottocento*, exh. cat. (Turin: Allemandi, 2011).

[9] Paul Benichou, *Le Temps des prophètes: Doctrines de l'âge romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

[10] ". . . il enrichit l'âme de l'humanité. . . Il est, comme le disait Dante de Virgile, leur guide, leur seigneur et leur maître." Rodin, *L'Art*, 227; *Victor Hugo vu par Rodin*, exh. cat. (Besançon, France: Museum of Fine Arts and Archeology, 2002).

[11] For statistics on the population of Paris since 1800, see *Cartogrammes et diagrammes relatifs à la population parisienne et à la fréquence des principales maladies à Paris pendant la période 1865–1887: Envoyés à l'Exposition universelle de 1889 par le service de statistique municipale de la ville de Paris* (Paris: Masson, 1889).

[12] The genealogical tree of the Rodin family was drawn by Cécile Goldscheider, *Auguste Rodin: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre sculpté*, tome 1, 1840–1886 (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1989), incipit.

[13] Carl Benedikt Frey, *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor, and Power in the Age of Automation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); see also Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[14] His written admonitions to his son are kept in box Jean Baptiste Rodin, AMR.

[15] Jean-Baptiste took retirement on August 1, 1861; he was then police inspector in the municipal police of Paris. Box Jean-Baptiste Rodin, AMR. All the following facts relating to Jean-Baptiste's career are based upon the documents kept in this box. On the scale of salaries in the French civil service at the time, see Christian Morrisson and Wayne Snyder, "Les Inégalités de revenus en France du début du XVIIIe siècle à 1985," *Revue économique* 51, no. 1 (2000): 119–54.

[16] Maria (1838–62) was the eldest child, followed by Auguste (1840–1917), and Anna, who died very young (1844–48).

[17] Yves Verneuil, *Les Agrégés: Histoire d'une exception française* (Paris: Belin, 2017), chapters 2, 3.

[18] Statistics on the price of labor during the nineteenth century can be found in Alfred de Foville, "Les Causes générales des variations des prix au XIXème siècle, V. La Hausse des salaires," *L'Economiste français*, October 19, 1878, 483–84.

[19] On these two denominations, see B. Dupiney de Vorepierre and J. M. Bertet, eds., *Dictionnaire français illustré et encyclopédie universelle* (Paris: Levy, 1860), 1:989; Georges Rigault, *Histoire générale de l'institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, 9 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1937–53), 5:1945; André Prevot, *L'Enseignement technique chez les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes au XVIIIème et XIXème siècles* (Paris: Liget, 1964); Henri Bedel, *Initiation à l'histoire de l'institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes: XIXème siècle 1805–1875* (Rome: Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, 2001); and Alexis Chevalier, *Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes et l'enseignement primaire après la Révolution 1797–1830* (Paris: Poussielgue, 1887).

[20] Emile de La Bédollière, *Le Nouveau Paris: Histoire de ses 20 arrondissements* (Paris: Barba, 1860), 334.

[21] "Le développement intellectuel tout seul et séparé du développement moral et religieux, devient un principe d'orgueil, d'insubordination, d'égoïsme et par conséquent de danger pour la société." Speech given by François Guizot, Chambre des Députés, April 30, 1833; quoted in François Guizot, *Complément des mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps: Histoire parlementaire de France: Recueil complet des discours prononcés dans les Chambres de 1819 à 1848* (Paris: Lévy, 1863), 52–53. André Petitat, "L'Émergence des systèmes scolaires d'État: Une culture scolaire pour le peuple," in *Production de l'école—Production de la société analyse socio-historique de quelques moments décisifs de l'évolution scolaire en Occident*, ed. André Petitat (Geneva: Droz, 1999), 233–73.

[22] *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes, par Messire de La Salle, nouvelle édition* (Paris: Moronval, 1838), 42.

[23] Shelfmark F 17 1402, Archives Nationales de France, Paris.

[24] On Jean-Hippolyte Rodin, see the report dated June 18, 1996, drawn up by the Archives de l'Oise, box Documents Rodin/Cheffer, AMR; I have added my personal findings.

[25] François Fortuné Guyot de Fère, *Statistique des lettres et des sciences en France: Départements* (Paris: Guyot, 1834–35), 209. This job was taken over by his son, Hippolyte, a scholar in the field of botany. On the library, housed in a large room within the collège, see G. Hector Quignon, *La Bibliothèque de la ville de Beauvais* (Paris: Champion, 1904), 36; and Charles

Fauqueux, *Beauvais, son histoire des origines à l'après-guerre 1939–1945* (Beauvais, France: Imprimerie Centrale, 1996), 126.

[26] *Almanach de l'Université royale* (Paris: Hachette, 1836), 34, 35. He is head of the “sixième primaire” (53, 62–63).

[27] Rodin is registered as a teacher at the Collège Communal in *Almanach du Département de l'Oise pour 1844* (Beauvais, France: Moisand, 1843), 12. He is head of the section “langues anciennes et modernes, cinquième” in *Almanach du Département de l'Oise pour 1846* (Beauvais, France: Moisand, 1846), 101–2. He resigned at the beginning of 1850, and another teacher was appointed in October to replace him, *Journal général de l'instruction publique et des cultes*, October 12, 1850, 502. He remained at the head of his boarding school until 1857 or 1858. In 1861, he no longer lived on rue Tournebroche.

[28] “il faut que ce soit sur des fondations solides, et durables qui ne puisse crouler aux vents des tempêtes les plus effroyables, et que ton travail un / verso temps avenir reste a la postérité, et qu'un jour avenir ont puisse dire detoi comme de ses grands hommes l'artiste Auguste Rodin est morte, mais il vit pour la prospérité presente, future et avenir. S'est ainsi qu'à pres la mort ont vit. S'est ainsi que l histoire vous fait vivre dans les siecle avenir Courage, Courage.” Note written by Jean-Baptiste Rodin for his son, [1850?], AMR. The French spelling is so disastrous that the text is difficult to translate into English.

[29] Statistics based upon the inquest carried out by Louis Maggiolo (1877) for 1866, François Furet and Wladimir Sachs, “La Croissance de l'alphabétisation en France (XVIIIe-XIXe siècle),” *Annales ESC* (1974): 714–37, esp. 714–16. See also *Statistique de l'instruction primaire en 1864 d'après les rapports officiels des inspecteurs d'Académie: Complément de la statistique de 1863*, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1866); and René Grevet, *L'Avènement de l'école contemporaine en France (1789–1835)* (Lille, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2001), 258.

[30] See P. G. Aaron and Jean-Claude Guillemard, “Artists as Dyslexics,” in *Visual Processes in Reading and Reading Disabilities*, ed. Dale W. Willows, Richard Kruk, and Evelyne Corcos (London: Routledge, 1993), 393–416.

[31] One of these sons, Auguste, married one of the daughters of Jacques Alexandre Rodin; he was active in the field of stationary and commercial engraving. Frederick Grunfeld, *Rodin: A Biography* (New York: Holt, 1987), 7.

[32] Coltat, 84 rue d'Enfer, “médailles et objets de sainteté.” *Annuaire-almanach du commerce, de l'industrie, de la magistrature et de l'administration* (Paris: Didot, 1876), 1682. Jean-Stanislas Coltat, producer of medals, 42, rue d'Enfer, transfers to Charles Henri Stanislas Coltat, to Marie Sophie Angelina Coltat, single, and to Paul Hippolyte Joseph Coltat, the full direction of the “société en commandite Coltat,” December 21, 1878. The factory was situated 84, rue d'Enfer, and later 42, rue Vavin. *Gazette des tribunaux*, January 9, 1879, 28, col. 1. See the letter by Hippolyte Coltat, son of Jean Stanislas Coltat (who married a sister of Rodin's father) to his cousin Auguste Rodin, Paris, January 10, 1891, with an engraving showing the factory. Box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR.

[33] They supplied places of pilgrimage with medals. See *Notice sur Notre-Dame de Beaulieu à Paulhac* (Mende, France: Pauc, 1893), 34, where the priest recommends the purchase of their wares; the *Annales franciscaines* III, V and VIème années, 1865–67, 56, recommends the Coltat company and their medals with the effigy of St Francis.

[34] The company is described in *Panthéon de l'industrie*, n. 917 (January 1893): 22. In 1858, they invented a new machine for making coins; see *Catalogue des brevets d'invention, 1858* (Paris: Bouchard-Huzard, 1859), 221; Patent n. 38172, reg. September 25, 1858, Mathon et Coltat, 110, rue d'Enfer, Paris. Jules François Norbert Mathon, who lived with the Coltat family, had a new process patented on November 5, 1858; see *Bulletin des lois de l'Empire français XV* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1860), 614.

[35] The Coltat company sold the following leaflet wholesale: *La Vie de Henri V (comte de Chambord) racontée aux ouvriers et aux paysans par un enfant du peuple* (Paris: Libraires, 1872), inside back cover. The same advertisement states that the Coltat company will shortly put up for sale a medal in copper with the portrait of the prince.

[36] Charles Maignen, *Maurice Maignen, directeur du Cercle Montparnasse, et les origines du mouvement social catholique en France (1822–1890)*, vol. 1 (Luçon, France: Pacteau, 1927), 562; on that question, see Antoine Proust, *Commission d'enquête sur la situation des ouvriers et des industries d'art instituée par décret en date du 24 décembre 1881* (Paris: Quantin, 1884).

[37] “. . . ceux de notre admirable XVIIIème siècle ont connu les lois fondamentales du métier . . . tandis que toutes les œuvres plus ou moins jolies qui relèvent de l'industrie plutôt que de l'art, ne résistent pas à la marche du temps. Elles sont stériles, parce qu'elles vieillissent très vite, et ne servent à personne.” Interview with Riccioito Canudo quoted in “Réflexions sur la beauté,” *L'Opinion*, June 11, 1910, 1–2; reprinted in *Faire avec les mains ce que l'on voit*, ed. Jean-

Paul Morel (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits/Fayard, 2011), 34–35. Rodin opposes an ancestral conception of the “métier” to the need for a fast execution, typical of the new industries in Rodin, *L'Art*, 164–65.

[38] Letter from Maria Rodin to Auguste Rodin, Etain or Avril, August 29, 1860, box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR, where she explains how she advised Mrs. Roos, a hairdresser and shopkeeper in Etain, to give up purchasing jewels from her agent and instead to buy this type of ware directly from her.

[39] Undated draft of a letter written by Maria to her Uncle and Aunt Butin living in Metz, [Paris, January 1862], box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR. On September 21, 1862, she took the veil in Paris.

[40] Undated draft of a letter written by Maria to her Uncle and Aunt Butin living in Metz, [Paris, January 1862], box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR. In this very important letter, she describes her former activities and says that she worked for the Coltat family. It should be pointed out that no directory of the time mentions Maria or her mother as independent sellers with shop premises.

[41] Institution of the Société Houzelot et Rodin, July 8, 1852, Minutier Central, étude Billion du Rousset, ET/XLVI/1033, Archives Nationales de France, Paris.

[42] Patent for the making of medals in intaglio, n. 405, 1242, reg. October 8, 1859, *Bulletin des lois de l'Empire français*, vol. 16, 1861; Patent for enamel work “Niellage” on gold and silver medals, n. 308, 423, reg. February 23, 1859, *Annuaire du commerce et de l'industrie* (Paris: Didot, 1859), 261. Houzelot had a workshop Quai de la Mégisserie, 10.

[43] Alfred de Liesville, *Histoire numismatique de la révolution de 1848* (Paris: Champion, 1877–83), 1:210. The project was not brought to completion.

[44] “Mobilier et objets d'art,” Houzelot, 1839, 20144787/30, Archives Nationales de France, Paris.

[45] Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, “Cristallisation, métamorphoses et résistances du patrimoine: Le Cas du musée de Cluny,” in *Mémoire: Culture-Ville-Musée/Memoria: Kultur-Stadt-Museum*, ed. Andreas Sohn (Bochum, Germany: Dieter Winkler, 2006), 263–82.

[46] On the competition between France and Great Britain for the exploitation of those techniques, see Alistair Grant and Angus Patterson, *The Museum and the Factory: The V&A, Elkington and the Electrical Revolution* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018).

[47] *Catalogue des bronzes pour les églises et des vases sacrés de Choiselat-Gallien et de Poussielgue-Rusand* (Paris: Rue Cassette, 1846), 2, where traditional techniques and modern technologies are lauded equally.

[48] Maxime Paz, “La Formation d'Auguste Rodin (1854–1865): Ou les petits arrangements avec la mémoire” (master's thesis, Université de Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 2013); François Blanchetière and Aline Magnien, eds., *Corps et décors, Rodin et les arts décoratifs*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Rodin, 2010); William Saadé, *Rodin et les arts décoratifs* (Paris: Editions Alternatives, 2009).

[49] Remarks by Auguste Rodin on his father's low esteem of artists quoted in René Cheruy, “Rodin's Gate of Hell Comes to America,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 20, 1929, 16–19; Anthony M. Ludovici, *Personal Reminiscences of Auguste Rodin* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1926), 1–2.

[50] “on arrive a sont but, et on devient un ouvrier hōrs du commun de s'est Confrère, on est l'éclaireure et l'homme qui fait connaître s'est talent, et qui par ce moyen triplé par sont industrie, et quadruple la pōche de son gousset; et peut aisement se donner un confortable, et si par la suite il à une famille il sait se rendre heureux lui-même, et sa famille, car on ne fait rien sans argent [sic].” Undated note written by Jean-Baptiste Rodin to Auguste Rodin, n.d., “Au sujet de ton travail,” AMR. [Underlining in the original].

[51] “qu'un jour avenir ont puisse dire detoi comme de ses grands hommes l'artiste Auguste Rodin est morte, mais il vit pour la prosperité presente, future et avenir. S'est ainsi qu'à pres la mort ont vit. S'est ainsi que l histoire vous fait vivre dans les siecle a venire.” Undated note written by Jean-Baptiste Rodin to Auguste Rodin, [ca. 1850?], AMR.

[52] Stéphane Laurent, *Les Arts appliqués en France, genèse d'un enseignement* (Paris: CTHS, 1999).

[53] Henry de Triqueti, *Bernard Palissy: Discours adressé par M. de Triqueti, . . . aux jeunes apprentis . . . le 2 décembre 1855, Comité de patronage de l'Église réformée de Paris*. 2nd ed. (Paris: Meyrueis, 1856). Palissy became a legendary figure at the time. See Alfred Dumesnil, *Bernard Palissy: Le Potier de terre, Légendes françaises* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1851); and *Œuvres complètes de Bernard Palissy: Avec une notice historique de Paul Antoine Cap* (Paris: DuBochet, 1844).

[54] *Mémoires de Benvenuto Cellini, . . . écrits par lui-même, et traduits par Léopold Leclanché* (Paris: Labitte, 1843); the second edition, in two volumes, appeared in 1847, with a dedication to Barye.

[55] “je recommande avant de faire un grand artiste de viser au positif; car il faut vivre avant d’être célèbre, et la célébrité ou la gloire n’est souvent que de la fumée sans consistance.” Letter from Jean-Hippolyte Rodin to his brother Jean Baptiste Rodin, Beauvais, February 5, 1866, box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR.

[56] “avec en plus une petite dédicace de ta main, cela me ferait un grand plaisir, on te connaît ici comme ailleurs mais on doute que tu sois mon cousin germain, honneur que je tiens à prouver.” Letter from Hippolyte Coltat to Auguste Rodin, Paris, January 10, 1891, box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR.

[57] “frère travaillant bien souvent le Dimanche et étant plongé dans ses bouquins et dans ses statues [*sic*].” Letter from Maria Rodin to her Uncle and Aunt Butin in Metz, Paris, August 11, 1861, box Rodin/Cheffer, AMR.

[58] Auguste Rodin, *Les Cathédrales de France* (Paris: Colin, 1914).

[59] “Est-ce des nuages qui sont comme des attaques, ou des mensonges? On la croit finie, et elle reparaît plus haute de vérité, comme une montagne élevée.” Box Brouillons Cathédrales de France, AMR.

[60] Charles Morice, a poet, was meant to help Rodin. Although the sculptor could not bear to see his compositions overly corrected by the young poet, there was no other solution. Antoine Bourdelle, the historian Gabriel Hanotaux, and even the art historian Louis Gillet were called for help, causing chaos in the preparation of the volume.

[61] “J’ai lu et relu les beaux fragments que vous m’avez confiés. . . . Je me mets dans l’état d’un savant chargé d’éditer un texte antique, qui nous serait parvenu par morceaux, sur des papyrus à demi consumés.” Letter from Louis Gillet to Auguste Rodin, Chaalis, December 1912, box Gillet, AMR.

[62] Mathieu Marraud, *Le Pouvoir marchand: Corps et corporatisme à Paris sous l’ancien régime* (Seyssel, France: Champ Vallon, 2020).

[63] Jones, “*Sculptors and Design Reform in France, 1848 to 1895.*”

[64] Héléne Pinet, ed., *Rodin et la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007). Rodin employed up to sixty workers in his studios.

[65] On the *Album Fenaille* and on Rodin’s friend and patron Maurice Fenaille, see *Joseph Vitta, passion de collection*, exh. cat. (Evian, France: Palais Lumière, 2014); and Héléne Lafont-Couturier and Annick Bergeon, eds., *Figures d’ombres: Les Dessins de Auguste Rodin, Une production de la maison Goupil* (Milan: Somogy, 1996).

[66] Judith Cladel, *Rodin, Sa vie glorieuse et inconnue* (Paris: Grasset, 1936), 402; *Aurora and Tithonus* (id. catalogue, 382), in Ruth Butler and Suzanne Glover Lindsay, eds., *The Collections of the National Gallery of Art, Systematic Catalogue, European Sculpture of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 406–8.

[67] S 988, Musée Rodin, Hotel Biron, Paris. It is presumed that the model in plaster was created by Rodin around 1896. From 1906 to 1908, two versions in marble were completed by an assistant, Victor Mathet; the third version is kept in the Musée Rodin (Soudbinine); Ruth Butler, “Auguste Rodin and Kate Simpson: Artist and Patron, A Perfect Match,” in Butler and Glover Lindsay, *The Collections of the National Gallery of Art*, 409–32; *European Painting and Sculpture, ca. 1770–1937, in the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 174–75.

[68] Christiane Wohlrab, “Rodin et le non finito,” in *Rodin, la chair, le marbre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Rodin, Hazan, 2012), 97–107.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Anonymous photographer, *Cast Collection of the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris: Plaster Casts after Original Sculptures by Michelangelo for the Medici Chapel, Florence*, state at the time of Rodin, 1919. Photograph. École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the École des Beaux-Arts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Auguste Rodin, *Bust of Jean-Baptiste Rodin*, 1860. Bronze, Rudier cast, 1917. Musée Rodin, Paris.
Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Anonymous, "A Notre-Dame des Victoires," Letter from Hippolyte Marie Stanislas Coltat to Auguste Rodin, Paris, January 10, 1891. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Charles Hippolyte Aubry, *Auguste Rodin in Top Hat*, ca. 1862. Photograph on albumen paper. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Charles Hippolyte Aubry, *Portrait of Auguste Rodin in Overalls*, ca. 1862. Photograph on albumen paper. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin.

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Fig. 6, Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917. Plaster. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Paul Cruet (and others), *The Hand of Rodin*, 1917. Plaster. The National Gallery of Art, Washington. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of The National Gallery of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Séraphin Soudbinine (after Auguste Rodin), *The Hand of God or the Creation*, 1916–18. After an original in plaster [n.d.] by Rodin. Marble. Musée Rodin, Paris. Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Musée Rodin. [\[return to text\]](#)