Introduction

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) forever changed the history of sculpture. Rarely had the medium so audaciously challenged the primacy of painting over the course of the nineteenth century. Long regarded as a “dead” medium of motionless, inert material, sculpture in Rodin’s nimble hands comes alive, breaking free of the plinths that traditionally separated sculpted figures in stone or metal from their earthbound beholders in flesh and blood.

What makes Rodin’s sculpture so modern, it has been argued, is the way in which he makes visible an aesthetic of process—how, in other words, he takes traditional sculpture apart and puts it back together again in new and daring ways. Strategies of multiplication, scalability, fragmentation, and recombinatory modes of assembly and display constitute some of the hallmarks of Rodin’s artistic practice. Key to these various strategies is a relentless spirit of play and experimentation with the translation and differentiation of media—clay, plaster, marble, bronze—through technical procedures of molding and casting.
Object Narratives

Perhaps the best, and no doubt the most complex, example of Rodin’s modernity is *The Gates of Hell*. Like the museum of decorative arts in Paris for which it was commissioned, *The Gates of Hell* was never fully realized: at the time of Rodin’s death, it remained a plaster model in the studio, assembled only posthumously in bronze as a complete ensemble. The state of unfinished was not for lack of dedication. Indeed, Rodin continuously labored over the work for nearly four decades—adding, subtracting, and modifying figures in an ever-changing narrative and spatial frame that was loosely based on the tumbling, weightless souls in Dante’s *Inferno*. The fruits of this labor can be seen in several of the most iconic works in Rodin’s oeuvre on display at the Cantor scaled up and down in various permutations, among them *The Three Shades* and *The Thinker*. For the art historian Leo Steinberg, *The Gates of Hell* constituted not just a masterpiece, but indeed a kind of referential storehouse, a “dumping ground and Noah’s Ark” of Rodin’s very best years of work.

Since antiquity, artists have employed techniques of molding and casting in order to replicate existing natural objects or works of art (e.g., plaster copies of marble statues) or fashion new ones that are intrinsically replicable (as in the case of bronze casting). In the case of the lost-wax method used by Rodin, a hollow mold, produced through the direct physical contingency of liquid substances and solid forms, guarantees an extraordinary degree of resemblance between the original and the resultant cast in bronze (see the video for a detailed, step-by-step look at the process of lost-wax casting of *The Gates of Hell*). For Rodin, that “original” was typically a clay model. Subsequently, his assistants would transform these clay models into the marble counterparts with which we are familiar today, or, in the case of bronzes, deliver the artist’s finished work to the foundries where Rodin himself reportedly never set foot.

Traditionally viewed as a “mechanical,” hence slavish and indeed mindless mode of copying or reproduction—one entrusted to skilled, but typically anonymous technicians—these procedures of molding and casting rarely occasion deeper analysis. As a kind of material stenography, the technical apparatus of molding and casting is useful not only because of its capacity for multiplication, but also in its omission of style on the part of anyone but the artist in the operative chain. At the same time, these techniques compel us to think carefully about what we think we mean by the status of an “original.”

Rodin offers an intriguing case for considering issues of authorship and the status of what constitutes an “original.” If by “original,” we mean a sculpture that bears the direct traces of the artist’s finishing touches in chiseled marble or chased bronze, then virtually none of the works we know by Rodin could be considered as such. Yet originality can be defined in other ways. Upon his death, the control of Rodin’s estate was given over to French government, and the Musée Rodin in Paris serves to this day as the arbiter of what counts as a legal “original” by Rodin. Indeed, the vast majority of the Cantor’s collection of Rodin comprises such posthumous, authorized “originals.” As such, they raise provocative questions about the status of these kinds of works. For some, these questions of originality...

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are simply anachronistic and had no currency for Rodin, whose approach to his own process was so elastic. For others, the conceit of an “authentic copy” is merely a myth or necessary fiction to assert and preserve a romantic notion of a singular artistic vision and authorship.

Rodin’s *The Age of Bronze*, represented in multiple versions at the Cantor, offers a compelling example of the fraught relationship between casting, authorship, and the status of an imputed “original.” First exhibited as a full-scale plaster figure in 1877, indeed the first that Rodin showed under his own name, *The Age of Bronze* was quickly mired in controversy when a critic accused him of having cast it from life—an accusation that infuriated Rodin as it slanderously reduced his expressive virtuosity to a merely mechanical operation. The figure was later cast in bronze and exhibited for the first time in 1880. In addition to the full-scale bronze (71 x 20 x 20 in.), we might compare two subsequent reductions: a first one in bronze (39 x 15.5 x 13 in.) and a second in plaster that has been patinated to look like bronze (26 x 8.5 x 17.78 in.). Rodin himself was deeply invested in the scalability and scalar effects of his work: one of his technicians, Henri Lebossé, advertised his ability to produce enlargements and reductions of various objects using a “mathematically perfected process” using a “special machine” that could create “counterparts” in serial “editions.”

The potential for risk here is that unauthorized editions (and thus not technically true “reproductions” according to some definitions) could potentially include not only casts made after the original plaster, but also casts of casts (*surmoulage*). What such a process gains in terms of ease in creating multiples from an extended replica series, it loses in terms of the potential for a real, physical distortion from the original: not only does the definition of surface details gradually dissolve with each subsequent reduction, but also the size of the cast of the cast shrinks as the bronze cools. Hence, as a form of both

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authorial and quality control, there is a legal limit (twelve in the case of Rodin, as determined by French law) to the number of bronzes that can be produced in an “original edition.” In order to differentiate them from unauthorized “fakes,” each one is numbered and marked with the foundry name. Yet even beyond these foundry marks, other distinctions still obtain: connoisseurs, for example, often prize the subtle differences in the patination of the bronzes, with those produced during Rodin’s lifetime evincing an especially extraordinary range of coloristic effects.

Even beyond the highly technical complexities of bronze casting, Rodin’s fondness for plaster casts, notwithstanding the fragility of the medium and its tendency to accrue a grimy patina of dust and dirt, signals a recursive relationship to issues of authorship and media. Take, for example, his portrait of Madame Fenaille, the wife of one of his most ardent supporters. Originally executed in marble by Rodin’s assistant (practicien), the bust was subsequently transformed into a plaster that could then be used as a record of the marble for posterity or else produced for sale. Here we see how the plaster indexes the marble through the marks of the chisel in the hair and at the base. These marks reverently evoke Michelangelo’s famous nonfinito works that so enchanted Rodin on his travels in Italy: sculptures that stage their various states of unfinish as a deliberate aesthetic—one that points to the Neoplatonic aim of the Renaissance master to liberate his figures from their marmoreal prisons. Yet what the dull plaster faithfully records through its form-hugging, viscous materiality, it loses in terms of the luminous quality of marble whose crystalline structure gleams and glitters in the light. In so doing, Rodin draws attention to the differentiation of media that constitutes an enduring theme of his work.

The magic of plaster, as Rodin shrewdly recognized, lay in its material capacity for manipulation—a manipulation not only of form, but also of space. Nowhere is this more evident than Rodin’s prodigious output of plaster hands. Many of these—at least 150 examples—were stored in chests of drawers and pulled out for visitors as if they were anatomical specimens or religious ex-votos, with one such visitor remarking that Rodin would “pick them up tenderly one by one and then turn them about and lay them back.” Thanks to their lightness, Rodin could deploy these disembodied hands in space in inventive ways in order to work out compositional problems in his larger sculptural ensembles. A photograph by E. Freuler (Suspended Hand in Plaster) shows a plaster study of the left hand of Eustache de Saint-Pierre, one of the figures in his monumental work, The Burghers of Calais. Strung up on a rig so that it hangs pendulously, at once defying gravity

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and making it visible, the suspended hand testifies to how Rodin thinks in space—space that is alternately positive and negative like the negative molds and positive casts that comprise his working process.

In contrast to the seeming weightlessness of the plaster hand in the photograph, a weightlessness that recalls the writhing figures strewn across *The Gates of Hell*, there is an emphatic heaviness in the bronze casts of these hands. A bronze cast of the very same vascular left hand of *Eustache de Saint-Pierre* offers a powerful demonstration of the material consequences of this medial translation of plaster into bronze. Contrary to Rodin’s usual practice, the mounting of these hands for museum display typically reorients them in ways that transform the gestural liveliness of these detached appendages into intensely ponderous objects: heavy, serious, immobile.

A bronze cast of *Rodin’s Hand Holding a Torso* offers an intriguing exception that ties together these interwoven themes of process, media, and authorship. Just three weeks before his death in 1917, Rodin consented to have his own hand cast in plaster by his assistant, Paul Cruet, who combined it with a female torso by his master. The addition of the torso enlivens the hand that handles it, orienting it in space. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the hand and the torso points up the differences between them: the indexical traces of Rodin’s flesh (even more visible in the plaster counterparts) versus the expressiveness of the silky female nude. It is ironic that Rodin should have reconsidered his longtime aversion to life casting mere weeks before his death. For even as the hand of the living artist inevitably projects an aura of creative spirit, it also evokes a mortiferous quality as a kind of fossilized, fetishistic part-object—one that was memorialized by Honoré de Balzac in his *Le chef d’oeuvre inconnu* (1831–1837):

Well, try to make a cast of your mistress’s hand, and set up the thing before you. You will see a monstrosity, a dead mass, bearing no resemblance to the living hand; you would be compelled to have recourse to the chisel of a sculptor who, without making an exact copy, would represent for you its movement and its life.

In *Rodin’s Hand Holding a Torso*, then, we see not only an uncanny foreshadowing of the artist’s death, but also, as Balzac recognized, a kind of deathliness in the uneasy synthesis of life casting and expressive form.
Questions

1. What kinds of value do we attribute to an original versus a copy? To what extent do you think it’s possible to learn about the intentions of the artist through objects that were never physically touched by the artist’s hand?

2. What do you make of the role of the assistant or technician (or the fabricator, as they are often called today) in bringing the artist’s vision to life?

3. Given that Rodin was so hostile to the practice of life casting, what do you think it is about his treatment of the body that compels us to rethink the relationship between art and nature?

Selected Bibliography


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