Rodin

Nationalmuseum@Konstakademien, Stockholm
1 October 2015 – 10 January 2016
Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki
5 February – 8 May 2016

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Fig. 1 Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), The Thinker, (1903), 1909. Bronze, H. 189 cm. Prince Eugen’s Waldemarsudde, Stockholm, in the Nationalmuseum exhibition Rodin.
The Rodin exhibition, which opened in autumn 2015 at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, was the Nationalmuseum’s first exhibition entirely devoted to sculpture since Sergel and his Roman Circle in 2004. The purpose of the exhibition was to present Auguste Rodin’s (1840–1917) sculptures and oeuvre to the Swedish and Nordic audience. The last time a monographic exhibition of this sculptor took place in Sweden was in 1988 at Millesgården, and the Nationalmuseum had not featured Rodin in a solo exhibition since 1966.

The project was a collaborative effort with Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki and Musée Rodin in Paris. Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, the previous Chief Curator of Musée Rodin, served as the project’s senior advisor. Our selection of Rodin sculptures was based on the works in Swedish and Finnish collections. Several lenders, and in particular Musée Rodin, also generously let us borrow works for the exhibition.

Our focus was to highlight the sculptor Rodin’s artistic practice and his experimental approach, and to show how he changed the art of sculpture forever. Over the years, many of Auguste Rodin’s works have become very famous and loved. However, when they were exhibited in the late 19th century, they were often deemed too daring and realistic, or dismissed as unfinished and lacking narrative context. Rodin’s lively, spontaneous imagery was entirely novel. With his intense focus on portraying the human body, he could be perceived as one of the last classical sculptors. His naturalistic rendition of muscles and movement express strong feelings, and the traces of the hands that shaped the clay or the rough stone are part of the artistic expression. What the world perceived as unfinished was for Rodin the embodiment of perfection. “In every object, the artist reveals the inner truths that underlie appearance”, he said.
An underlying theme in the exhibition was formed by the Nordic collectors of Rodin’s works and the contacts between the Nordic countries at the time, where Rodin encountered both outrage and admiration.

The exhibition filled three rooms and was structured chronologically and thematically. The idea was that visitors could follow the trajectory of Rodin’s career and creative development, while gaining an idea of his approach and artistic aspirations, by getting to know some of the themes and subjects that recur throughout his practice. An introduction to the exhibition was provided by The Thinker, Rodin’s most famous sculpture, which exists in countless versions and reproductions. (An internet search for “Rodin’s The Thinker” gives thousands of hits.) This monumental version of the sculpture – the sixth to be made – was commissioned directly from Rodin by the Swedish artist Prince Eugen. Since 1909 it stands in the garden of Prince Eugen’s Waldemarsudde in Stockholm. In the Nationalmuseum’s exhibition it was displayed indoors for the first time in nearly a century (it was allegedly featured at Liljevalchs konsthall in Stockholm in the 1920s) (Fig. 1).

Near The Thinker was The Age of Bronze, which was one of the first works by Rodin to be bought by the Nationalmuseum (1914). The Age of Bronze or The Awakening Man, or The Vanquished One, as it is also called, were shown in public for the first time in 1877, causing a scandal because it was considered to be far too realistic. Rodin was even suspected of having made life casts of the model, rather than sculpting freely. Another aspect that puzzled the audience was that the sculpture seemed to be devoid of theme or narrative (it was originally exhibited without a title). For Rodin, however, the true subject was man, human emotions and passions, articulated in the human body. Rodin made the body speak (Fig. 2).

Despite the scandal around The Age of Bronze, Rodin was commissioned in 1880 by the French government to make a bronze door for a planned museum of decorative arts in Paris. The museum was never built,
and the door, called *The Gates of Hell* after Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, was never completed. However, Rodin continued to work on it to the end of his life. The first exhibition room was devoted to *The Gates of Hell*, with its hundreds of figures that came to serve as an inspirational reservoir for Rodin’s creativity. Many of his figures and compositions originate in the Gates, including *The Thinker*, *Shadows*, *The Kiss* and *Danaïd*. Rodin was also unconventional and daring in his creative process. Using an approach commonly called assemblage, he combined different figures into new compositions and expressions. This is the case with, for instance, *Falling Man* and *Crouched Woman*, which, when combined, form the group *I am Beautiful*. *The Gates of Hell*, which is more than six feet tall, was not included in the exhibition, but the position of the various sculptures on the work was presented in a slide show (Fig. 3).

The large middle room was intended to convey the feeling of an artist’s studio, with bare-wood skirting boards and natural light, and enlarged photos from Rodin’s workshops. Here, visitors could acquaint themselves with a few of Rodin’s numerous portraits (Jules Dalou, Victor Hugo, Jean-Paul Laurens) and most popular separate sculptures, including *Three Sirens* or *The Prodigal Son*, in various materials and formats (Fig. 4). One of the most spectacular features of the exhibition was the plaster model for a monument to Victor Hugo (second version, second model). This version of the monument includes *Three Sirens*, which, incidentally, also originated in *The Gates of Hell*. The monument was not considered to be sufficiently heroising – with Hugo portrayed as a naked old man leaning against a rock – and was rejected, as were most of Rodin’s public commissions. Despite the disappointments and the ensuing scandals, public monuments were the vehicle for Rodin’s continuous experimentation.
Meditation, exhibited in the third room, is another work that was rejected. This figure also comes from The Gates of Hell but was enlarged and used for a new version of the Victor Hugo monument.

In order to squeeze it in, Rodin had to sever the arms and lower legs of the female figure. In that condition it represented perfection to Rodin, and he decided to exhibit a plaster version of it, calling it Meditation or The Inner Voice. In 1897, it was included in the art section of the Stockholm Exhibition. After the exhibition, it was offered to the Nationalmuseum as a gift, but the Museum turned it down! Reviews from the time indicate that the work was perceived as fragmentary and incomplete, like "something unearthed at Pompeii". The event caused yet another scandal, however, and this time it was in the sculptor’s favour. The Swedish artists who were opponents to academic art, headed by names such as Anders Zorn, Carl Larsson and Richard Bergh, wrote a homage to Rodin to express their sympathy with the sculptor. The sculpture was later acquired by Oscar II, King of Sweden, but has been missing since the early 1900s (Fig 5).

The final part of the exhibition featured a few of the Nordic sculptors who were influenced in one way or another by Rodin. Many Nordic artists went to Paris around 1900. Auguste Rodin had a seminal influence on many of them, while others found
it hard to understand his art. But hardly anyone remained unaffected by him. Several Nordic sculptors received advice from Rodin, but few were actually his students. Carl Milles and Carl Eldh both visited Rodin’s studio and were strongly inspired by him. The two Finnish sculptors Sigrid af Forselles and Hilda Flodin, however, were among those who actively assisted at Rodin’s studio. In this way, they gained the technical experience and self-confidence to launch their independent careers. A few artists, including Anders Zorn, became close friends with the French sculptor. Zorn and Rodin exchanged art with each other (Fig. 6).

The exhibition offered a few “tactile stations” with a selection of Rodin reproductions from the Musée Rodin in Paris. Visitors were encouraged to touch the replicas. “Tactile guided tours” were also organised throughout the exhibition period for the blind and partially sighted. In the autumn, second-year dance students from the Aesthetic Programme at Fryshuset in Stockholm presented their interpretation of the Rodin exhibition. In the project, called “Unfreeze”, the students created their own works based on Rodin’s sculptures, emanating in four short dance videos, which were shown online and in the exhibition during the last four weeks.

The exhibition architecture was designed by the Nationalmuseum’s Olof Lundström. The enlarged photographs were from Musée Rodin in Paris. The catalogue was produced jointly with Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki and Antoinette Le Normand-Romain.