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FIGURES OF EROS

DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLOURS, 1890-1917

Bacchante, 1900. A. Rodin. © musée Rodin.
At the height of his glory in the early 1890s, the sculptor began a series of drawings concentrating on the nude. Works that were independent of his sculpture, these drawings powerfully expressed the plastic thought of the artist as he began to draw without seeing, that is to say, without taking his eyes off the model. This is the story of travels in the country of desire.

I imagine Auguste Rodin as a child. At the market, his mother buys prunes the greengrocer wraps in pages from illustrated books. At home, the little boy copies these pictures with such passion that his parents enroll him in the École spéciale de dessin et de mathématiques, better known as the Petite école, when he reaches fourteen. Apparently, this does not satisfy his creative thirst, because every afternoon he goes to the Louvre to draw the works of classical art. And six evenings a week, he attends a drawing class at the Manufacture des Gobelins. This class is invaluable to him, for in Rodin’s own words, “we worked with a live model there.” Any time left over from this busy schedule he spends at the Jardin des Plantes, where Barye, the sculptor of animals, holds a workshop. Rodin adds that he used to go to the Petite école, when he reaches fourteen. Rodin exhibited many of these drawings during his lifetime, proof of his talent. Auguste Rodin’s erotic drawings are the expression of the free expression that he considered them above all a creation in and of themselves, as a sort of a “matrix”, the central figure in this composition and others as well. Experiencing with variations in technique, Rodin sometimes also created new drawings that were inspired by temporary assemblages.

FIGURES OF EROS

Visitors to the Musée Rodin are invited to discover an exceptional ensemble of figures of Eros. The one hundred and forty drawings and watercolours and five sculptures exhibited here represent an intimate aspect of Auguste Rodin’s creative work.

The presentation of these figures of Eros is the logical sequel to the exhibition of the magnificent Combodun Donzere collection and intended to underline the special nature of the drawings, both in the sculptor’s production and in the museum’s collections. The rediscovery of Rodin’s graphic work, the result of research by historians and by the museum’s curators, lends a broader dimension to the consideration of these figures, one that goes beyond their singularly erotic quality. These drawings are the expression of the approach of a mature artist. Viewing the collection is not an invitation to discover the artist’s secret chamber. On the contrary, Rodin exhibited many of these drawings during his lifetime, proof that he considered them above all a creation in and of themselves, and a creation that was, more than ever, the result of an insatiable passion. Auguste Rodin copied these pictures with such passion that his parents enrolled him in the École spéciale de dessin et de mathématiques, better known as the Petite école, when he reached fourteen. Apparently, this does not satisfy his creative thirst, because every afternoon he goes to the Louvre to draw the works of classical art. And six evenings a week, he attends a drawing class at the Manufacture des Gobelins. This class is invaluable to him, for in Rodin’s own words, “we worked with a live model there.” Any time left over from this busy schedule he spends at the Jardin des Plantes, where Barye, the sculptor of animals, holds forth. Rodin adds that he used to go to the horse market as well, “wielding off over the place.” Could so much energy lead at least to talent, if not genius? Apparently his contemporaries thought not. In 1857, at seventeen, Auguste Rodin applied for admission to the École des Beaux Arts. And he was turned down. Further attempts in 1858 and 1859 met with failure as well, but Rodin refused to become discouraged. He earned his living by working at a variety of jobs, so just at making earring at a goldsmith’s followed in rapid succession by a commission for decorative figures with tuf-foot-tal towers. The rest is history. Rodin rose, at first rather chaotically, to the heights of renown. Remember, for example, the exhibition of Au d’or (the Bronze Age) in 1877. In Brussels, then in Paris, he was accused of having taken his cast from a live model. Another artist might not have recovered from such an accusation. Rodin was not a forger but he remained nonetheless a student, in other words, one who never ceased to learn. He learned by observation and by creating things, then taking them apart before constructing them anew. In this spirit he started off, once again, on a new adventure in 1890. All of Europe recognized and valued his sculpted works. He could simply bask in the light of this glory. But perhaps he was reminded of a voyage to Italy, in the footsteps of Michelangelo, in 1875. Later on, Rodin would say that being around the master’s work had left him so of his secrets. But he noticed that even of his students, nor his masters, did as he did. Rodin could only conclude that the secret was within him and him alone. But then, what is a secret for an artist, except this territory that he alone can master? We are reminded of Cézanne’s remark, made at about the same time, about his etchings: “he accused Gaugain of wanting to copy he others.” Rodin, the sculptor, the sensation was transmitted between the model and the master; this clay that he knelt down and shaped as he observed the model who held the pose. He soon adapted the same method in drawing, as the critic Clément-Jann remarked, “With a sheet of paper resting on a piece of cardboard and a block lead pencil—sometimes a pen—, he would have the model capture an unstable pose, and then he would quickly sketch, never lowering his eyes from the model. The hand would go any old way, the pencil often went off the page, and the drawing was depicted, or complemented of a member (…) This first draft done, Rodin would rectify his work, sometimes correcting it with a stroke of red pencil, but most often, he did this by tracing”. One can imagine the rapid gestures and the movements of the artist who, as the English portrait artist William Rothenstein observed, “swarmed around the models, never taking his eyes off her or him.” Working in this way Rodin sought to absorb the lines of the human body.
Around 1900, Rodin began to purposely use the accidents that occurred in the process of creating a work, much as he did in sculpture. Hence a blast of ink or watercolour might become the wing of a butterfly. But in this «Mpoins», the artist used the halo to create a celestial landscape, a sea of coloured clouds, among which the buttocks of a woman appear. It is unlikely that the drawing of the woman was taken from the pose of a live model, since Rodin used the technique of transfer much as he did in «Etchings». The Japanese influence seems obvious here, with the clouds composing the sketch of a chain of mountains in the background.

> «They should become a part of me, he said. (…) My purpose is to test to what degree my hands can actually feel what my eyes are seeing.» Erotic images, or obscene ones? In any case, one cannot remain indifferent to their force. We know that Rodin spoke out in defence of Nijinsky whose interpretation of a L. Diaghilev ballet «mil d’un fiore» is created a major scandal in 1912. The artist, in turn, was attacked (by Le Figaro) for having displayed «reproductions» or crude drawings on the walls of his studio. Several years before that, in 1907, a series of his drawings, including nude or half-dressed female figures he called Psyches, drew comparable hostile reactions when they were exhibited at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery. One critic went as far as to write that scien- tist illustration is so shameless they would make a monkey blush. Yet Rodin considered these drawings representable, since he did not find them improper. Many of them were exhibited in the capitals of Europe in 1899 and thereafter. One can imagine the turmoil these large watercolours and reworked drawings inspired. «What, in fact, do we see?» Couples of women clapping each other women expos- ing their genitalia, others evoking the wisp of carious, the object of which leaves no room for ambiguity. The poses themselves are equally suggestive, and often downright aero- batic. Nothing could disturb the dissimulation of this «Mil d’un fiore» so dear to Courtet. We know of Rodin’s bend to women, exemplified in the story Lauder Duncan told. During a sitting while she tried to explain her theories on a new form of dance to him, she realised that the artist was paying no atten- tion whatsoever to what she was saying. She looked at me, his eyes shining beneath lowered lids, and then, with the same expres- sion he wore when contemplating his works, he came towards me. He ran his hand over my neck, my breasts, pressed my arms, touched my thighs with his fingertips, then my bare legs and my bare feet. He began to knead my body, like clay while he let out such a sigh that bur- ned me, that made me weak. Nonetheless, this fever should not oversha- dow what Rodin was attempting to capture in these poses, whether spontaneous ones or planned. For him, they in fact constituted an actual repertoire of attitudes that allowed him, every time, to meet the challenge of sei- zing and portraying the image then and there. This is why he rapidly ceased to employ the coloured ink, watercolour or gouache he used in the early 1890s and began to reduce his drawings to pencil stro- kes, sometimes accentuated with hachures and effects of shading. Each figure is thus reduced to a simple contour, «between nature and paper, Rodin declared, I eliminated talent. I do not reason, I simply let myself go. Here, indeed, is a secret unveiled.»

» Rodin, who is currently in a fourth state of mind, asks to see my erotic Japanese prints and is in admiration before these favoured heads of women, these bowing necks, these nervously reac- ting arms, (…) off the voluptuous and fer- nient reality of coitus, the sculptural splen- dour of bodies that melt and fit together in the erotic expression melting in pleasure. Perhaps Rodin, who began to collect Oriental prints as soon as he acquired the means, had seen Hokusai’s engraving, «Adam and Octopus», which Goncourt himself describ- ed as erotic expression melting in pleasure (…) to such an extent that we do not know if the subject is a disrobed woman or alive. We find this image again in Rodin’s drawing enti- tled «The Octopus». The woman, lying on her back, is covered to her shoulders with a veil of water— a veil whose blue colour has faded with time. Between her thighs, a red- dish octopus extends its tentacles.
THE TREASURE OF THE MUSÉE RODIN COLLECTIONS

Dominique Viéville, Directeur of the Musée Rodin, is by no means lacking in projects for the future, not the least being a series of temporary exhibitions designed to regularly highlight the collections. The pieces that typify Rodin’s work and its special place in the modern moment will continue to be prominently displayed in the museum.

Michel La Tênière—Following the exhibition of the series of drawings devoted to the Cambodian Dancers, the Musée Rodin is now presenting a collection of drawings, etchings of Eros along with five sculptures. Are these two exhibitions indicative of an intent to develop a new programme? Dominique Viéville—My predecessor was responsible for the "Cambodian Dancers" exhibition; etchings of Eros is entirely in line with this exhibition in that it illustrates once again the great Rodin's power: his drawings, his work in the museum's collections. In developing a new programme? «Figures of Eros», along with five Dancers», the Musée Rodin is now developing the series of drawings designed to regularly highlight the collections. The pieces that typify Rodin’s work and its special place in the modern moment will continue to be prominently displayed in the museum.

I would like to see the content of these collections more fully exploited. I may remind you that the collections include around 6,000 sculptures, 7,000 drawings, 33,000 photographs, and about 6,000 works and objects that belonged to Rodin. In 2007, we will be exhibiting his portrait of the Japanese dancer Hokusai as well as the Japanese prints and objects Rodin collected. We are also working on a project for 2008 that concerns the sculptor’s collections of classical art. The theme of this will be a double view—the view of classical antiquity prevalent in France around 1900, and Rodin’s own view of the same, particularly after he had met Rilke, who brought him his own perception of Mitteleuropa.

What is the museum's current situation? Michel La Tênière—What is the museum's current situation? The renovated building of «the Chapel» was inaugurated in November 2005. This renewal of «the Chapel» has restored the building to its original appearance. The work needed to make the building of «the Chapel» usable has taken a long time. The museum’s major projects for the future will be the renovation of the museum’s permanent collections, the extension of the permanent exhibition, and the development of temporary exhibitions. These will be regular exhibitions and will be designed to regularly highlight the museum’s collections. The museum’s task to protect his works, his works of art, of course.

La Tênière—Do you have any projects concerning the collection works of photography? D. Viéville—There are several aspects of this collection. First of all, there are photos of Rodin’s works, shot by great photographers such as Ansel Adams, Rodin/Howe, and Coles, for example. There are also the photos Rodin commissioned, ones he used as a support for studio work. He used them as plastic elements, much as he used plaster or earth for his works of sculpture. In developing the illustrations for the famous ‘‘Goethe’’ albums, we see that he mixed sketches and photos he himself had retouched to produce the result we know. This absolutely amazing visual method shows that the photo takes part directly, and as a means, in the progressive creation of the work. At the end of 2007, we will present an exhibition demonstrating the different ways in which Rodin used photographs. Sometimes he signed them on the back, the way an artist signs a print. He had taken over this image because, in his eyes, he had become part of the actual work.

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In 2006, the museum boarded out about two thousand works, which is remarkable. This summer the Musée Rodin organized an external exhibition of over 250 works in Lisbon, and another equally important exhibition is currently running in Japan. We have also contributed to two other major exhibitions going on right now at the Royal Academy in London and a second at the Museum in Basel. Acting fully as the sculptor’s heir and assuming the most correct of his work, the museum’s fundamental vocation is to give the museum’s task to protect his works, his works of art, of course.

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