

Rodin and the art of ancient Greece: Pathos confronts bathos

Rodin and the art of ancient Greece at The British Museum, 26th April to 29th July 2018

Wow, this is good! *Rodin and the art of ancient Greece* at the British Museum is an eye-pleasing, myth-busting, brain-tickling stonker of a show. It is a pocket-sized Rodin retrospective and a fresh look at the Parthenon statues, plus it poses questions about authenticity and artifice, production and reproduction, pathos and bathos. Again wow!

When in 1881, Auguste Rodin took the boat train from Paris to London, sculpture was in the doldrums. The Royal Academy was publicly subordinating sculpture to painting. In thrall to the romantic notion of the artist as a solitary genius, the public were distrustful of the creative process of sculpture in which quarrymen, stone masons, studio assistants, foundrymen and the sculptor all collaborate. What's more, this scepticism was deepened by the mechanization of sculpture; mass production was reducing statues to statuettes destined for suburban hallways and mantelpieces. On top of this, the norms of Classical art, so long the touchstone of artistic excellence in sculpture, were being challenged by Modernism. Sculpture had become so far removed from the sculptor and so reduced in consequence that the public rarely detected the touch of the artist to authenticate a work and imbue it with meaning.

But on this fateful trip to London, Rodin chanced upon the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. The impact on Rodin of Pheidias, the master sculptor, and his most famous creation, the Parthenon statues, was immediate and life-long. Inspired by this and many subsequent visits to the British Museum, Rodin embarked on a career of sustained creativity that seen him now acknowledged as the Founding Father of modern sculpture.



The Parthenon gallery in the British Museum, about 1890. Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum

To explore this triangular relationship between the British Museum, Pheidias and Rodin, the show presents many of Rodin's most iconic pieces alongside the Parthenon statues that inspired them. Setting aside the vexed question of the ownership of these statues (and the related thought that this show is a justification for keeping the statues in London), these juxtapositions work brilliantly, shedding new light on the art of both men.

It all starts with a flash of bizarre originality not seen again in the show. *Pallas (Athena) with the Parthenon* (1896) represents Athena the goddess of sculpture giving birth to the Parthenon. In reality, it's a marble bust of the society beauty, Mrs Marianna Russell. Below her hair line, her features are smooth and polished but rising Monty Python-like out of her rough-hewn head is a miniature version of the Parthenon. In this surreal fusing of late 19th century society with the art of Pheidias, the bust perfectly introduces the show's themes.



Pallas (Athena) with the Parthenon, 1896 Marble and plaster © Musée Rodin

Next up is *The Age of Bronze* (1877) set beside the nude youth from the North Frieze of the Parthenon that inspired it. But where the youth is part of a narrative – holding a spear, stretching, preparing for a parade – Rodin removes the spear and the context, and instead positions his statue in a distinctly modern stasis, poised and ready but inwardly focused and isolated.

When first exhibited, the statue was thought to be so naturalistic that critics accused Rodin of taking the artistic shortcut of casting it from life. In fact, Rodin used a Belgian soldier as a model but so startling was the statue's naturalism, the controversy persisted.



The Age of Bronze, 1877. Bronze. Sandcast before 1916 © Musée Rodin

Then there's another bust. In *Thought* (1895), the head of Camille Claudel, Rodin's lover, emerges from a block of white marble. Here the influence is Michelangelo and his non finito statues, but whereas his non finito *Slaves* struggle to free themselves from their stone prisons, Rodin's touch is less sure; Camille's head appears to bob up from a milk bath. What's more for the first time, the notes make clear that the finished work is not by Rodin. Instead an unknown stone mason carved the bust from Rodin's clay model. Rodin didn't carve.

On to *The Kiss* (1898) displayed beside two Goddesses from the Parthenon's East Pediment. This couple are extraordinary – and I'm not referring to *The Kiss*. The two goddesses seem to flow into each other under the rise and fall of their tunics. The first reclines against the second, the pose constrained by the pediment's triangular shape but executed with such grace that the two figures reconcile many opposites – flesh and stone, sensuality and chastity, mortality and divinity.



Goddesses in diaphanous drapery, figures L and M from the east pediment of the Parthenon, about 438–432 BC, Marble. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Beside them, *The Kiss* is *The Kiss* is *The Kiss*, that unrivalled embodiment of sensual love. Or is it? Next to the two divinities and with 360° viewing, Rodin's famous snog-fest looks awkward and mawkish, the man's over-sized hand clinging to the woman's thigh, her arm desperately drawing his head downwards. And this isn't *The Kiss* - it's *A Kiss*. We're looking at a plaster cast of the original statue. It might be Rodin's plaster cast that he used to travel with but it's still a reproduction of a statue that he didn't carve in the first place. *This Kiss* is now twice removed from Rodin's authenticating touch.



The Kiss, large version, after 1898. Plaster, cast from first marble version, of 1888–98 © Musée Rodin

The Thinker is round the next corner. This universal symbol of thinking man is undeniably impressive. At first glance, the figure seems reflective, but get closer and his muscles seem ready for motion, an impression heightened by the positioning of his right elbow on his left leg to create tension in the pose. Interestingly, the notes suggest this pose indicates grief, not reflection, an idea supported by the nearby Parthenon Frieze that shows Demeter in the same posture soberly mourning her daughter Persephone.

Only there's two *Thinkers* on display. The monumental patinated plaster statue of *The Thinker* from 1903 is shown beside a small white plaster statuette of *The Thinker* from 1881-2. Does duplication reduce the statue's universality and downgrade its status as high art or simply make the figure's power and meaning more widely available? Subtly, the show is starting to confront us with the same questions that troubled the 19th century public.

The ambivalence of Rodin's touch continues. Inspired by Ilissos from the West Pediment, Rodin responds with *Ariadne* (1905) and *Earth* (1896). Rodin though inverts the gender and softens the pose of the animated and dynamically masculine Ilissos, but where he is fully formed and genuine, Rodin's responses appear contrived and lumpen.

So too with *The Martyr* (1899) and the dying Lapith from the Parthenon's South Metope. The Lapith lies fatally wounded, his life ebbing away, while Rodin's *Martyr* looks like she (Rodin has again transposed the gender) has just fallen awkwardly.

And sometimes Rodin's touch simply deserts him. The original Iris from the West Pediment of the Parthenon is weightless, her tunic pressed hard against her body as she flies through the air. In contrast, Rodin's *Iris the Messenger of The Gods* (1895) is a coarse naked contortionist, executing a flying hitch-kick that brings her right leg impossibly high offering a detailed view of her sex.

But it would be a shame to approach *The Burghers of Calais* (1889) with any ambivalence because this is both Rodin's masterwork and the show's undoubted highlight. Stunningly back-lit by the gallery's floor to ceiling windows, the six enormous male figures, who volunteered for death to save Calais from the besieging English, individually contemplate their impending fates and simultaneously fuse into a heart-rending display of shared grief.

So it seems churlish to mention that there aren't six Burghers. There are 80 of them. Twelve complete castings in places as far flung as Tokyo, Copenhagen and Pasadena, plus eight individual figures. We're just looking at the six that happen to live outside the Houses of Parliament. Rodin's touch might be sure here but we need to resign ourselves to looking at only *Some Burghers of Calais*.



The Burghers of Calais (1889). Victoria Tower Gardens London. Wikipedia Commons

Like the 19th century public then, we need a reconciliation with sculpture and with Rodin to relocate his authenticity and the artistic sureness of his touch, and the show tries hard to provide this. It makes clear for instance that Rodin was indisputably an Hellenophile who publicly championed the forms and values of Classical art to reinvigorate sculpture as an artistic practice. For good measure, he filled his house and garden with over 6000 Greek and Roman statues, often mood-lighting them for effect.

We need to acknowledge as well his promotion of public sculpture and embrace of modern production methods, which democratised sculpture and widened access to the art, even if as a consequence, it rendered the authenticity of his work negotiable. The show makes clear too how much Rodin loved fragments, seeing in them as much artistic worth as a complete figure. Prefiguring Modernism's preoccupation with the artist reassembling the past to create meaning, Rodin literally combined fragments of Classic statuary into new original works.

But just as we might be reaching an understanding with Rodin, the final exhibit of the show stress-tests any reconciliation with his artistic vision to destruction. *The Walking Man* (1907), a giant figure cast in black bronze and made by fusing two fragments - a spare armless torso from his studio and legs previously used in a statue of St John the Baptist - is either a Modernist Everyman marching resolutely into the 20th century.

Or it's an ugly mess. The striding pose with both feet flat on the ground is anatomically impossible. The joint between the torso and legs is rough and unfinished, leaving the figure looking crude and technically immature, while the deliberate absence of head and arms reeks of artifice.

Rodin's touch here is either triumphantly sure or distinctly problematic. Meanwhile the Parthenon Friezes, quietly unequivocal in the veracity of their art, surround *The Walking Man* providing a candid comparison.



The Walking Man 1907 Black bronze

There are so many questions raised by this show my head is spinning. What's a genuine Rodin? Are his works honest and immediate, or awkward and mawkish? Does he confidently herald Modernism, or offer a crude and contrived response to Classical Greek art? Is he the most accomplished and influential sculptor of modern times, or should his reputation be re-evaluated? If you like your grey matter tickled, this is the show for you. Allow your mind to ricochet around and this show reveals layer after layer of substance.

But we need no reconciliation with Pheidias and the Parthenon statues. Like a Greek chorus, they quietly provide a self-confident and truthful commentary that contrasts with the sheer noise of Rodin and the questions he provokes. Throughout the show, their pathos confronts his bathos, for there is an artlessness to Pheidias's art. *The Parthenon* statues are simply what they are; authentic and miraculous depictions of life's great themes - love, strife, grief, death - all realised with grace and precision. Their power is in their attention to detail – how Demeter and Ares relax in conversation, how the cavalrymen exchange hand signals above the noise of the parade, how the nostrils flare and the mouth gapes as Selene's horse labours to exhaustion.

The eye level setting of the exhibits and the perfect lighting allow a unique opportunity to appreciate close up the veracity of these extraordinary works – and those of Rodin! Sight lines lead from exhibit to exhibit while changes of scale and viewing angle keep our attention. What's more, the wall notes, exhibit labels and catalogue are models of clarity, telling us just what we need to know and no more. So keen are the organisers to share their evident pride in the show, we're even allowed to take photographs.

I loved it! So plaudits all round – to Bank of America Merrill Lynch, to Musée Rodin and their co-curators, to the design team and especially to Ian Jenkins the BM curator. Long may you live and prosper for you have created a show of rare style and substance.

Published: Rodin and the art of ancient Greece at the British Museum, London Student

Date published: Friday 15th June 2018

URL: <https://londonstudent.coop/rodin-and-the-art-of-ancient-greece-at-the-british-museum/>