

## The Making of Rodin

It was good to be at The Making of Rodin at Tate Modern, my first post-pandemic show. Of all our major galleries, Tate Modern needs people. Without them, its cavernous spaces feel cold and echoey while its art chatters noisily away on the walls like one-sided conversations. Will this show bring back the (socially distanced) crowds? Sadly, I doubt it.

Rodin ought to be a box-office name. The British Museum show eighteen months ago proved that. But there's the Tate's first problem: how to justify another Rodin show so soon after the BM's triumphant Rodin and the art of ancient Greece? And there's the second problem too. The BM show looked convincingly back to locate Rodin's inspiration in classical times. The Tate by definition has to look forward to establish Rodin as a modernist. As the first 60 years of his life including his formative years and most of his productive career were lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and only his last 17 in the 20<sup>th</sup>, this is a tough curatorial brief.

The Tate show's answer is to mirror the Pavillon de l'Alma, Rodin's temporary showcase set up in 1900 near the Paris Universal Exhibition. Rodin made the unusual decision to just show plaster casts in the Pavillon. The large-scale photo of this on one of the walls shows a jumble of body parts and half-finished works, all in plaster and stacked high and low in their hundreds, to give visitors a sense of being in the presence of Rodin the genius in full creative flow.

The Tate follows suit as best as it can. Drawing heavily on the Musée Rodin's archives, the show features – with two exceptions – only plaster casts, of which 60 have never been displayed before. Working with plaster casts let Rodin have permanent copies of his clay models made which could then be broken up, remodelled and reassembled multiple times until a final work emerged.

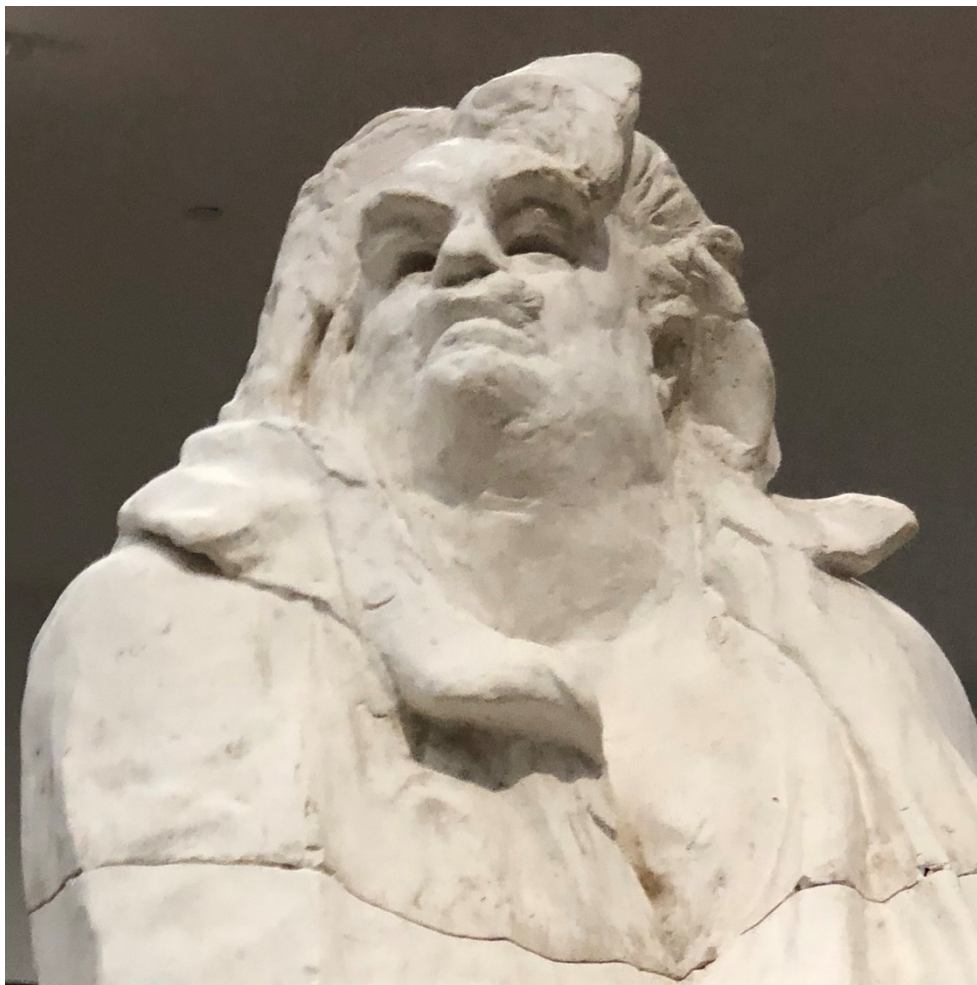


*The EY Exhibition: The Making of Rodin Installation view © Tate photography (Matt Greenwood)*

In the large central room are a selection of Rodin's best-known works in plaster to show this process in action. On the corner of the central dais is *The Thinker*, gigantic and brooding, while perched behind is a smaller mini-me *Thinker*, both preparatory studies for the finished work, as is the elephantine *Thinker's* foot on its own pedestal and *The Thinker's* oversized detached head nearby. At the other end of the dais is a study for *The Walking Man*, a decapitated torso with mismatched arms and legs striding blindly into the distance.

Between these stand the studies for the *Monument to Balzac*. One of only two genuine flashes of modernity in the show, Rodin set out not to capture the likeness of Balzac – by all accounts, a large man with the face of a jolly farmer – but to give an impression of the great writer's intellectual presence. The result is a monolithic work so abstract that it obscures the human figure lying beneath the surface. But in almost a guarantee of its modernity, the final plaster model was rejected by the literary society that commissioned it and it was not until 1939, 22 years after Rodin's death, that this model was cast in bronze.

The casts on display show Rodin building up his masterwork piece by piece. First there's the bust of the Tours cart driver said to resemble the great man, then another preparatory head with sepulchral eyes, then a separate pot belly. There's even a cast of a dressing gown drenched in plaster, standing stiff and square, that will swathe the statue like Balzac's writing cloak. With each element displayed around a plaster of the finished work, this is sculpture as assemblage.



August Rodin *Balzac monumental* (1898) plaster (personal photograph)

Next are the face masks of Ohta Hisa, perhaps the show's other flash of modernity. Appearing on stage as Hanako (Little Flower), Ohta performed a version of hara-kiri, the Japanese suicide ritual usually associated with men. Rodin became obsessed with capturing the look of anguish on Ohta's face as she approached death and produced over 50 masks and busts of her, more than any other sitter. I say perhaps to their modernity though as the Tate is drawing a line forward to the works of the European avant garde - Picasso, Braque and Matisse among others - that were heavily influenced by traditional African sculpture. Just as easily the line can be drawn backwards to the centuries-old custom of mask-wearing in Japanese Noh theatre. To my eye, the visual resemblance between the masks of Ohta and Noh masks is unmistakable.

The show's highlight is the original plaster of *Memorial to the Burghers of Calais*. Restored especially for this show and being displayed for the first time outside France, this is a revelation. Many of us Londoners are familiar with the bronze *Burghers* that sits in Parliament Square; it featured in the British Museum show too. The bronze version though has a solidity that belies the pathos of the six figures as they shuffle to their deaths. But here lit unflinchingly by the Tate's floor-to-ceiling windows, the bone-white plaster points up almost unbearably the hopelessness and vulnerability of the group. They are already ghosts, walking less to their deaths as already dead. The plaster too reveals unexpected details: how the simple tunics fall over fragile bodies, how feet are exaggerated, bruised and bare, how the hands speak eloquently of misery, despair and resignation, giving each figure character.



Auguste Rodin *Monument to the Burghers of Calais* (1889) Musée Rodin, S.00153

Then suddenly the show loses its way. There's a glass case of half-sized plaster hands. Rodin had a thing about hands apparently, filling drawer after drawer with them. But here they seem fidgety and macabre, like something from a freak show. Depending on your cultural frame of reference, they'll either bring to mind Thing from the Addams Family or the short story by Maupassant.



Auguste Rodin *Limbs* (Circa 1880–1917) Plaster and terracotta Musée Rodin Photo © agence photographique du musée Rodin - Jerome Manoukian

In the jumble of the Pavillon de l'Alma, each plaster was alive with possibilities. They could be scaled up, taken apart and reassembled, cast in bronze or sculpted in stone. But here in the show, for all the talk in the wall notes about fluidity and repetition, the reverse happens. These pieces are static, out of context and remote. Safely contained in glass cases, we're asked to see them as works in their own right. Perhaps the Tate is drawing a modernist parallel with the disposables of Duchamps and Warhol. But they are not finished works: many are amorphous, with pencil marks, nails and jagged edges to guide future shaping. They're part of a creative process but as we're never told what part, it's hard to know how to look at these pieces.



Auguste Rodin *Large Clenched Hand with Imploring Figure* (before 1890) Musée Rodin; S.01946

Inconveniently, Rodin the man is also resolutely of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Tate can't resist tutting. His relationship with his female models is 'starkly unequal' and in the muddy erotic watercolours shown in a side room, he fails to 'personalise their nude bodies'. The colour of his plaster prompts equivocal comments about his association of whiteness and racial purity, while Rodin's collection of antiquities was made possible by 'European colonisation'. For the British Museum, he used these classical works as inspiration which tells you about Rodin; for the Tate, it was 'appropriation', which tells you about the Tate. The curators don't seem to approve of him very much which seems to beg the question why put the show on in the first place.

All the back-stage noise of the plaster casts makes you yearn for the finished works, and fortunately there are two. Right at the start is *The Age of Bronze*, the lithely homoerotic study of a young Belgian soldier. And there's *The Kiss* too, brought across the river from Tate Britain. Rodin didn't like *The Kiss*; he thought it 'a sculpted knick-knack'. But here as all the stopping -and-starting of the plaster casts finally settles into a finished work, it reminds us of Rodin's genius for capturing the human condition.



Auguste Rodin *The Kiss* (1901-4) Tate

There's such a good Rodin show out there; one that focuses not on Rodin as lone genius but Rodin as team leader supported by pantographers to scale up his clay models, mould makers to manufacture his plaster casts, and foundry workers and master masons to produce the finished works. This show isn't that though. It is handsomely staged and nicely concise. But it is a show of sketches and half-formed ideas taken out of context. It feels awkward, apologetic, unsure of itself. You won't learn much about Rodin or his creative processes, but you will learn a lot about the Tate. So focus instead on looking, not reading, and go for the lowering Balzac and for the raw emotion of *The Burghers of Calais*.

The EY Exhibition: *The Making of Rodin* is on at Tate Modern Bankside SE1 9TG until 21<sup>st</sup> November 2021