

Auguste Rodin: The Revolutionary Genius and *The Burghers of Calais*
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Hailed as the greatest sculptor of the nineteenth century and arguably one of the best sculptors of all time, Auguste Rodin's contributions to modernity in sculpture are indelible. The artistic turbulence surrounding Rodin's life included movements towards realism and naturalism in painting. Impressionistic painting followed soon after, eventually becoming a well-established force. It appears, in retrospect, that these movements were accompanied by the emergence of a modern aesthetic. The revolutionary painters of the nineteenth century are numerous. There are a host of masters, each forwarding the work in his or her own way. In nineteenth-century sculpture Auguste Rodin is *the* master. He is recognized as the father of modern sculpture. Once rejected and reviled, his unconventional modeling is now accepted as the epitome of modern sculpture.

During his life, Rodin's work generated constant criticism and controversy. His intense realism and dedication to rendering Nature created disquiet among an audience conditioned by the French salons. The surfaces of his nudes are modeled with an impressionistic play of light and shadow. Many contemporaries considered his works unfinished sketches, rough and intolerably fragmented. These qualities originated from Rodin's unconventional artistic theories and method of working. When Rodin modeled the human figure, he sought to capture not only a transitory anatomical form, but the inner spirit as well. Rodin's revolutionary qualities, his innovation, fragmentation, and strict loyalty to Nature reach their climax in his monument *The Burghers of Calais*.

The Burghers of Calais is an emotionally charged monument piece, especially suited to Rodin's genius. Its narrative basis is both literary and historical. During the Hundred Years War the city of Calais suffered under a violent eleven-month siege from King Edward III of England. In 1347, King Edward proclaimed that if six of the leading citizens of Calais would sacrifice themselves, the siege would be lifted from their beloved city. The conditions of his demand specifically required the burghers to present Edward the keys to the city, "stripped to their shirts with their heads and feet bare and a cord around their necks" (Descharnes 106). The ropes around their necks were intended for their subsequent hanging. Fortunately this fate, under the entreaties of Edward's queen, never came to pass. This historical event is recorded in the late-medieval *Chronicals* written by Froissart (Elsen 70).

The city of Calais failed in a series of attempts to honor its heroic citizens with a monumental sculpture. In 1884, they again proposed the idea and in earnest began the process of choosing its creator. The city's mayor, Omer Dewavrin, implemented the project. Rodin was introduced to the commission and to Dewavrin through a mutual friend, Alphonse Isaac. After submitting a preliminary sketch to the municipal council in 1884, Rodin received the official commission January 28th, 1885. (Descharnes 106).

Throughout the more than ten years of the creation of the *Burghers* monument, the project was steeped in controversy and disagreement. The Calais municipal council had originally conceived a great heroic statue of only the leading burgher, Eustache de Saint-Pierre. In July of 1885, Rodin presented a small plaster sketch, his first maquette, to the council. It featured not one man, but all six burghers, grouped in varying positions and raised on a pedestal. In response to Rodin's more than five months of work, careful planning, and composing, the committee responded in a letter, "This is not how we had visualized our glorious fellow citizens as they made their way to the camp of the King of England" (Descharnes 108). In particular, the

committee was offended by the apparent “dejection” of Rodin’s figures as well as their unconventional grouping (Descharnes 108). Ironically, these were the features Rodin had most deliberately labored over in creating his first maquette.

Traditionally, monumental sculpture of the type the committee had envisioned, was composed of an idealized heroic figure in a pyramidal composition. In every way, monuments were to immortalize and celebrate their subject, raising them above the earthly trials and sufferings of ordinary human beings. In addition, the entire composition was to come together in a pleasing and solid visual whole, with every part in harmony with the rest. These traditional elements are vital in understanding the revolutionary nature of Rodin’s *Burghers*.

It would be an understatement merely to label Rodin’s methods “unconventional,” because his *Burghers* challenge tradition on every point. In deliberate opposition to tradition, Rodin’s monument portrays six naturalistic figures, suffering from the mental anguish brought upon them by the contemplation of near death. They are arranged in a rectangular cubic space, creating a fragmented compilation of isolated human forms. Once destined to stand on a pedestal, the final monument, in accordance with Rodin’s revised conception, has no pedestal. Instead, it occupies the space of the viewer, enhancing the emotional impact. The successful combination of these radical elements is evidence of Rodin’s expressive and revolutionary genius.

Rodin’s revolutionary spirit is evident in his entire creative process, from the projects conception to its completion. As stated by Paul Laurens, a painter and Rodin’s contemporary, “[Rodin] belongs to the race of those men who march alone” (Times par.2). In many ways Rodin did ‘march alone.’ He was isolated by his radical theories and experimental methods of creation. Yet by challenging these conventions, Rodin freed himself of the restrictive norms of traditional art. He followed his own intuition. Regarding his own creative process he stated:

I follow no working rule. My own pleasure is my only guide. I do only what interests me, and only when it suites me. Art is pleasurable: it can and must require effort, but not constraint. If a work is to turn out fine, the artist, when undertaking it, must feel a joyous and pressing need to create it (Masson 7).

It was in this attitude that Rodin approached his creation of *The Burghers of Calais*. The project seemed perfectly tailored to Rodin’s interests in fourteenth-century history and his ability to portray human emotion. In both avenues, historical and visual, he sought to recreate the scene in absolute truth.

The underlying drive to all of Rodin’s work was a desire to be true; true to nature and true to himself. Fervently and adamantly Rodin maintained throughout his career that his main objective in modeling was to faithfully represent Nature. “I obey Nature in everything,” he asserted, “and I never pretend to command her. My only ambition is to be... faithful to her” (Gsell 30). In a revealing statement Rodin explains his secret to success, “Everything is contained in Nature,” he said, “When the artist follows Nature he gets everything” (Untermeyer 175). “Everything” to Rodin meant obtaining aesthetic beauty by combining anatomical realism with inner truth. In modeling his figures, Rodin sought to capture not only the form of the body but also the accompanying personality, intellect, and immediate emotion. Rodin understood “the human body” to be the “mirror of the soul” (Descharnes 239), and only by representing both outer body and inner soul, could his works accurately recreate Nature.

In his creation of the *Burghers* Rodin desired to be true to the historical account found in Froissart's *Chronicals*, as well as visually true to his understanding of the six heroes. In accordance with Froissart's historical account, Rodin modeled the men in an attitude of leaving their beloved city, carrying the keys of Calais, and wearing only the prescribed shirts and ropes around their necks. It is, however, Rodin's extensive visual research that is most interesting and that set him apart from his peers. In trying to recreate a believable visual depiction of the six burghers, Rodin's research extended so far as to try to match the physical type of the six men (Masson 92). He spent a great deal of time developing each individual character. This process included seeking out human models "whose beauty lay in their strength of character, not in their appearance. He chose models whose moving, naked bodies suggested a maturity hardened by arduous physical labor or combat" (Elsen 78). His careful choice of models and his treatment of them in modeling is an important component of his creative process.

Whereas other sculptors would artificially pose their models, Rodin filled his studio with nude models in motion. He carefully studied their moving bodies and transitory attitudes. When he sketched in clay, his hands worked quickly while his eyes remained fixed on the model (Lampert 103). His goal was always to capture a particular fleeting attitude in the expressive vehicle of the human body. Paul Gsell, a sculptor who published a series of conversations with Rodin, records of the master:

He has learned to read the feelings as expressed in every part of the body. The face is generally considered as the only mirror of the soul; the mobility of the features of the face seems to us the only exterior expression of the spiritual life. In reality there is not a muscle of the body which does not express the inner variations of feelings (Gsell 27-28).

This amazing ability to see emotion expressed in the entire body and capture it in modeling is only part of Rodin's singular ability. Rodin also differed from other sculptors in his ideas about beauty. He believed that, "what is commonly called ugliness in nature can in art become full of great beauty" (Gsell 42). His belief in the intrinsic beauty of all human beings sheds light on the criteria from which he created the six burghers. In an effort to remain true to Nature and to the six burghers, Rodin painstakingly sketched his nude models in various expressive attitudes.

There are over one hundred surviving three-dimensional studies for *the Burghers of Calais*, and they represent important key steps in Rodin's creative process. The studies include maquettes, heads, hands, feet, headless figures and facial masks (Lampert 104). Rodin's treatment of his fragmentary studies was innovative. In his time he was unique in his view of fragments as being "art in their own right" (Lampert 104). Rodin's multitude of studies provided a visual library of expressive fragments that could be combined and changed like puzzle pieces in the creation of his figures. His method of working in this way, serves to affirm speculation that the bodies of the six burghers were created separately from the heads (Lampert 107). In his creation of the individual bodies, Rodin insisted on first creating life-size nude studies, before draping the figures (Elsen 80). Rodin considered this a necessary step in the progression of his figures.

Interestingly, the idea of fragmentation is carried over into the completed monument. The six burghers are arranged in a seemingly unorganized grouping. The burghers were "conceived separately...and assembled afterwards" (Bell par. 45). Their perceived fragmentation, however, has more to do with their separate spiritual states than with their piecemeal modeling. Rodin explains his deliberate arrangement in the following words:

In the confusion of the goodbyes, only St. Pierre has begun to walk in order to cut short the painful scene...He leaves the city and descends toward the camp; it is he who gives the group the aspect of a march, of movement. Eustache is the first who descends, and for my lines, it is necessary that he be thus...They are tied voluntarily by the same sacrifice, but each one responds individually according to his age and situation. These people live through their legendary expressions, and their grouping must be found through their silhouettes in the atmosphere, and of necessity against the background of the sky made possible by a low pedestal (Elsen 74).

The men are deliberately arranged in a way that creates both a cohesive movement and a fragmented isolation of emotion. Each burgher is isolated in his own thoughts.

The completed monument is a striking grouping of realistic modeling surging with emotion. In the hands of Rodin, the six burghers come alive as six individual personalities, each struggling with the impending fate before him. Body and spirit are united in an intense dramatic climax. Rodin's depiction is a revolutionary view of heroism. In Rodin's words, the burghers struggle heroically:

In the indecision of the last inner combat which ensues, between the devotion to their cause and their fear of dying, each of them is isolated in front of his conscience...And certainly, if I have succeeded in showing how much the body, weakened by the most cruel sufferings, still holds on to life, how much power it still has over the spirit that is consumed with bravery, I can congratulate myself on not having remained beneath the noble theme I dealt with (Bell par. 29).

It is clear that Rodin's hope was to communicate to his audience the heroism of the six men, but in a new and revolutionary way. Instead of falsely glorifying the burghers, Rodin desired instead to capture the true physical and spiritual condition of his human characters as he imagined them. His desired success, though now indisputable, was not immediately recognized.

Despite initial disagreements with the committee and periods of financial drought, the monument was installed in the city of Calais June 3, 1895. The general response was that the figures were not "sufficiently heroic"(Goldscheider 120). In essence, the monument did not fit neatly into the criteria for monumental sculpture prescribed by the French Salon. Yet, over time, the evolution of art has conditioned our modern sensibility. Rodin's *Burghers* no longer seem lacking in heroic essence, but epitomize the modern hero.

A final revolutionary point of interest is Rodin's treatment of the modeled surfaces. His works are often labeled as impressionistic, due to the play of light and shadow across the surfaces of a fleeting gesture. His broken, irregular surfaces are formed just to the point of description, where light and shadows coexist to create the impression of form. He once said, "Sculpture is quite simply the art of depression and protuberance" (Canaday 299). In describing the essential qualities of a masterpiece, Rodin summarized, "In short, the purest masterpieces are those in which one finds no inexpressive waste of forms, lines and colors, but where all absolutely all, expresses thought and soul" (Gsell 170). Each depression, each raised area is important in conveying the final message. This is certainly true when applied to Rodin's *Burghers*. When considering the surface, there is no 'inexpressive waste.' Every detail, whether

in the folds of the drapery, the enlarged hands and feet, or the intricate modeling of the faces, serves a deliberate expressive purpose, heightened by the contrast of light and shadow.

Rodin's *Burghers* has made a decisive impact on modern sculpture, and has helped to shape the modern view of sculpture. As the father of sculptural modernity, Rodin's revolutionary approach to *The Burghers of Calais* embodies a new attitude toward monumental sculpture. His creative process from start to finish ushered in an altered definition of sculptural art and its purpose in our lives. He was a devoted master of the nude, reintroducing his audience to the powerful possibilities of rendering Nature. In modern estimations of his work, Rodin has attained the level of success he once desired. According to John Canady, author of *Mainstreams in Modern Art*,

The burghers are living presences; their common humanity is not smothered by their heroism, which makes the heroism all the more impressive. Realistic observation, romantic passion, classical restraint, and impressionistic rendering—an impossibly contradictory combination on the face of it—are blended with such unobtrusive perfection that one is unaware of the sculpture as a synthesis. It stands as a work of art that needs no classification except that it is a Rodin (Canaday 299-300).

Such acclaim would certainly appeal to the singular master who rejected conventions to follow the intuition of his own artistic genius.

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