

Clash of the Titans: Rodin-Matisse

By Jeanne Calmont

In 1899, Matisse (1869-1954) acquired from Vollard the Buste d'Henri Rochefort , an original sculpture by Rodin (1840-1917) from which he quickly made two drawings. More than just introducing the work of two artists who met only once in 1900, and the subject of the current exposition at the Musée Rodin in Paris (from October 23rd, 2009-28 February 28th, 2010), the acquisition raises the delicate question concerning original sculpted works (as opposed to reproductions) and their prices. In other words, how to decipher auction catalogs and buy a Rodin sculpture here and a Matisse sculpture there?

Simply put, and without going into the intricacies of the law *, it should be noted that since the Act of August 1st 2006 (transposing the European Directive of September 27th, 2001 concerning the right of resale) posthumous castings are no longer considered originals because the copies are not executed by the artist himself or under his direction.

Rodin : Titan I



Rodin, *L'homme qui marche*, Plâtre, avant 1899, Musée Rodin © musée Rodin - Photo : Adam Rzepka

Because he has one foot in one century, and the other foot in another, Rodin's sculptures are in many ways exemplary of the legal problems concerning the classification of bronzes, dilemmas resulting from a succession of laws (the 2006 being the latest). In addition to those problems there are the general troubles of copyright cessation and devolution, and the right of reproduction, that was as we remember automatically transferred along with ownership of the sculpture until 1910. Otherwise said, until this date, the foundry where Rodin had his plaster or clay model made into one or more bronze sculptures was *ipso facto* vested right to reproduce the work. Among the foundries with whom he worked, we must mention first of all Ferdinand Barbedienne (1810-1892) who held for twenty years the exclusivity for the casts of *Eternal Spring* and *The Kiss*. Of exceptional quality, it goes without saying that these prints are highly sought. In addition there were the Griffous, Gruets, Bingens, Gonons ... and if there is one dynasty associated with Rodin, it's the Rudiers. Under the direction of Francis Rudier, the foundry produced 115 bronzes between 1881 and 1904, most bearing a seal or signature. Many of Rodin's bronzes are marked by Alexis Rudier (the brother), who opened his own foundry in 1874. Eugene Rudier (son) takes over the family business (and the signature of his father) which becomes Rodin's number one foundry in 1902, his exclusive from 1913 until his death (in 1954), and the official foundry of the Musee Rodin.

Without going into detail here* regarding the legal issues affecting the valuation of bronzes, let's look at their form and their prices. Which Rodin bronzes were most sold and the best sellers at auction in a base year (2009-2010)?

Two days apart, two bronze copies of Rodin's most popular work, *The Kiss*, were sold in London during the Impressionists sessions at Christie's and Sotheby's. Each bore the brand of Barbedienne's foundry and the first, measuring 60 cm, was sold for 412,956 Euros on February 2nd, 2010 and the other, measuring 25.2 cm, sold for 177,397 Euros on February 4th, 2010. No fewer than five others went on sale in 2009 for prices ranging from €135,420 (Sotheby's, London, November 5th, 2009, 25.7 cm, from the foundry of Alexis Rudier, cast in 1928) to €3,794,000 (Christie's, New York, November 3, 2009, 86.4 cm, called "Door sized"). We must remember that the work was initially part of the monumental project *The Gates of Hell*, commissioned by the state in 1880. The subject was originally Paolo and Francesca, the lovers from Dante's *Divine Comedy* condemned to wander in Hell. By 1886, Rodin felt the work too sensual to fit into the chaos of *The Gates of Hell*, and instead made the piece autonomous, leaving no details which recall the identity of the lovers. The abstract title he gave the public complies with the universal intentions of the sculptor to emphasize the form and the integration of forms in space using pure figuration. Remember that this "great trinket" as Rodin called it, exists in three marble versions executed in his workshop (Rodin was not technically a sculptor but rather a modeller), preserved in public collections: Paris (Museum Rodin), London (Tate Gallery) and Copenhagen (Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek).

Another piece created during the intense period of work on *The Gates of Hell* that would also remain independent, ***Eternal Spring***, a variant of *The Kiss*, has very fluid manner which evokes 18th century statuary. This work, which was a great success, was produced several times in bronze and marble, and has in one year, gone up for auction at least five times for estimates ranging from 600 Euros (edition of 499 pieces) to €199,367 million (Sotheby's, London, February 4, 2009).

THE ETERNAL IDOL is also part of the work which was composed from elements of *The Gates of Hell*. Reunited in 1890, cast in bronze in 1891 and carved in marble in 1893, the figures of the woman and the man gliding along each other's torsos evoke (as does the title) the symbolic tendencies of Rodin's work in the late nineteenth century. Three versions of this work circulated in the auction houses in 2009. However, with two unsold pieces (estimated from 40,000-50,000 Euros to 450,000-550,000 Euros) and a version sold for €77,000 below the lower estimate (Paris, Claude Aguttes, December 16th, 2009), the results are not up to the extreme sensuality of the work.

Created in 1880 in its original size (70cm) to decorate the tympanum of *The Gates of Hell*, ***The Thinker*** represented *ab initio* the figure of the tortured poet (Dante). In 1888, when the work is exposed as a single work,

and 1904 when it acquires a monumental size (180cm), *The Thinker* became the archetype for the man whose strength of meditation suspends a physical power uncommon to musculature. How much should it cost at auction to acquire this model of manly virtue? The past six times the piece has gone to auction in 2009, two were bought in, one has sold for €1,100 (Naples, Casa d'Aste Vincent, December 18, 2009, 13cm), another for €5,500 (Cologne Van Ham Kunstauktionen, November 20, 2009, 36cm), another €15,000 (Munich, Hampel Fine Art Auctions, March 28, 2009, 36cm). The last, being a bronze of original size and weight, went for €256,000 (Paris, Mathias, Baron Ribeyre and Lemoine, June 17, 2009, 72.5 cm).

In the repertoire for the sculptor's forms, the hands are the part to which he pays the most attention, to the point of isolating them and making autonomous sculptures. This fragmentary interest proceeds the approach through which Rodin assembles and reconstructs existing clay elements (hands, legs, feet, torsos ...) which he systematically molds together under the term "abattis". Modern it is, this process culminates with the isolation of the body parts from his sculptures which, as demiurge, have an intrinsic, independent value. This is true for the hands of a few of the *Bourgeois de Calais*, which are selling between €10,000 (Paris, Sotheby's, May 28, 2009) and €38,000 (Versailles, Eric Pillon Enchères, May 10, 2009). Together with *The Cathedral* and *The Secret*, **THE HAND OF GOD** is the most emblematic of his works where the hand becomes completely self-sufficient and extraordinarily expressive. On November 25th, 2009, a copy of that divine hand which is also that of the sculptor was sold for €135,000 (Paris, Mathias, Baron Ribeyre and Lemoine).

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The sculptor's tendencies for fragmentation and *non finito* (the raw material is apparent in most of his works) are confirmed in a masterpiece of the genre: **The Walking Man**. Made from studies of legs and torsos from *St. Jean-Baptiste* (1880) a copy of which was sold for 66,906 Euros (London, Christie's, February 5th, 2009), the nude figure is rough. Without a head or arms, it renounces definitively the traditional academic dogma of "completeness". Rough, the bronze surface leaves no room for polite, airy strokes. The universal, primitive, and modern men were born, and assembled together in a work of which copies are rare.

Matisse : Titan II



Matisse, *Le Serf*, Bronze, 1900-1903, coll.musée Matisse de Nice © succession H. Matisse - Photo : F. Fernandez

A year after his meeting with Rodin, Matisse began sculpting and began the realization of **SERF** (1903) exposed with outstretched arms at the 1904 Salon d'Automne (before the renowned Salon des Fauves in 1905). But in 1908, when he changed his workshop, the arms of the model were damaged. Instead of repairing them, Matisse decided to remove them before casting the bronze figure. Aside from the type of rustic style and masterly manner in which the sculpture envelops space, the elliptical creation, partial and incomplete, reminds us of Rodin's work and *The Walking Man* in particular. The last auction where a copy of the work was included in the catalog was in 2001: and it was sold for 3,458,144 Euros (New York, Phillips de Pury, November 5th, 2001).

With the exception of this 92.5 cm sculpture, rare are the sculpted works of large dimension by Matisse, who made little over sixty pieces: mainly busts and nudes modeled in clay (like Rodin, Matisse is a modeller) and molten bronze (notably Valsuani, renowned for the quality of their lost wax castings).

The painter's sculpted body is more restricted than that of Rodin's works and is therefore less frequent in auctions. One must go back to 2000 to find a trace of **The Serpentine** (1909) which sold for €14,066,540 (New York, Sotheby's, May 10, 2000). Taking the name of a dance invented by the famous Loie Fuller, the work reflects Matisse's lasting interest for the topic. Like Rodin, he finds in this rhythmic body an opportunity to renew his approach to movement. The ungainly, sinuous figure stretches out to seem both full and empty.

Between 1909 (year of *The Dance*, St. Petersburg, The Hermitage Museum) and 1930, Matisse created a series of **Nude Backs** where he faces the pictorial problems he encountered: the silhouette and sketch of the figures on one hand, and the relationship between form and substance on the other. Cast in bronze after the artist's death, none of these modern bas-reliefs have gone to auction the last ten years. While Rodin suggested in 1899 that he return with his more evolved drawings (a charge that will disappoint the young Matisse, who was seeking to simplify, thus making his first meeting with the teacher his last) this collection of backs where the pattern melts into the media is symptomatic of how the figure gains independence from the model and representation: a path taken by Rodin as well: that of the autonomy of visual language.

Giacometti : **The Third Man**



Alberto Giacometti, *L'Homme qui marche I*, bronze, estimation: £12-18 million/ €14-20 million © Sotheby's

After *L'Homme qui marche* by Rodin and *Le Serf* by Matisse, **L'HOMME QUI MARCHE** (1960) by Giacometti (1901-1966) went a step further into modernity. It also beat all former records making the work the most expensive ever sold : 66,392,600 Euros at Sotheby's (London) February 3rd, 2010 for the exceptional bronze measuring 1m83 painted by the artist.

When and how much for the bronze of Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon?

Note: Hammer prices indicated

* Read at this subject the article by Jessica Giraud and Jeanne Calmont under « Find the legal parade ».

Bibliographie : *Matisse/Rodin* (catalogue d'exposition), Paris, RMN, 2009.

<http://www.france24.com/en/20100204-giacometti-smashes-auction-record-sothebys-walking-man-sculpture>
(<http://www.france24.com/en/20100204-giacometti-smashes-auction-record-sothebys-walking-man-sculpture>)

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