

Rodin and Michelangelo: Nature and Tradition

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In the summer of 1875 Florence celebrated the 400th anniversary of Michelangelo's birth, and, in February 1876, Auguste Rodin visited Italy and encountered Michelangelo's sculpture *in situ* for the first time. In the eyes of Rodin's contemporary critics and biographers, Michelangelo reached out to Rodin at that moment, illuminating a new path for him, and for modern sculpture. Most recently, *Rodin and Michelangelo: A Study in Artistic Inspiration*, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, rekindled interest in Michelangelo's impact on Rodin and, by extension, his successors.¹ This convention of associating the two artists started at the beginning of Rodin's public success and is of such long-standing that it possesses the qualities of historical fact. The relationship can be documented in the literature and its effect verified through the study of Rodin's own work.

This paper will argue that when Rodin encountered Michelangelo's work, he experienced a blend of the Classical style with the body in natural, expressive motion. This combination of tradition and vibrant forms coincided with current interpretations of Michelangelo's sculpture and personal image. In addition Michelangelo's style seemed to mirror Rodin's own training and ambitions at the time. In Rodin's eyes they shared a preference for fugitive motion, fixed in time by the sculptor. For Rodin, this approach related directly to the technique of the Greeks and represented a move away from Academic idealism. To support this contention, first, several French texts published prior to 1876 will be employed to delineate how critics used Michelangelo to alternately support and subvert the Academic style at the time of Rodin's trip. Second, Rodin's early training and statements concerning his 1876 trip will be examined to define the affinity between the two artists.

In Rodin's age, criticism of Michelangelo proceeded on two fronts: first, despite his *terribilità*, he was employed by some critics as a model of sculptural propriety; second, in the eyes of more progressive critics, he was a heroic rebel who provided an example of the expressive possibilities of sculpture. In his *Salon of 1765*, even the progressive Diderot pre-

sented the conventional limitations of sculpture that seemed imposed naturally by its materials. He wrote that, "one can paint whatever one wants; sculpture—severe, grave, chaste—must choose."² Diderot also accepted the requirement that sculpture present a high degree of organization and surface finish to the viewer that complemented the gravity of its subject matter. Ironically, he used Michelangelo's unfinished works to bolster his argument, when he wrote:

. . . a slight imperfection in drawing that's scarcely noticeable in a painting is unforgivable in a statue. Michelangelo knew this well; when he despaired of achieving flawless perfection he preferred to leave the marble rough-hewn.³

A carver was bound to his rigid material, which, in Diderot's estimation, limited the possibilities for creative expression by virtue of its hardness. Artistic imagination, even on the scale of Michelangelo's genius, could not exceed the requirements of limited conception and perfect finish imposed by the marble.

Those sculptors who adhered to these conventions in their pursuit of success led to Baudelaire's lamenting essay, "Why is Sculpture Boring?" in his *Salon of 1846*. Although Baudelaire challenged painters to push the limits of expression, a willingness to adhere to the more conservative critics' expectations marked Baudelaire's critical approach to sculpture. While he applauded more dynamic works, Baudelaire still believed that the materials of sculpture imposed natural limitations on expression. He described this phenomenon in his *Salon of 1859*,⁴ writing:

With what a prodigious power have Egypt, Greece, Michelangelo, Coustou and a few others invested these motionless phantoms! Upon everything which is human it bestows something eternity [*sic*], which partakes of the hardness of the substance used. . . the flickering and faceted dream of painting is transformed into a solid and stubborn meditation.⁵

¹ See Flavio Fergonzi, Maria Mimita Lamberti, Pina Ragionieri and Christopher Riopelle, *Rodin and Michelangelo: A Study in Artistic Inspiration* exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997).

² Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, ed. and trans. John Goodman, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995) 159.

³ Diderot 159.

⁴ By 1859, Baudelaire had reversed his position on the quality of Salon sculpture entirely; since it had become, in his opinion, a more dynamic art.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris, 1845-1862: Salons and other Exhibitions*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (Oxford: Phaidon, 1965) 205.

Even Baudelaire expected sculpture to maintain the still, meditative character of the medium.

Surely Rodin did not visit Florence to imbibe this spirit of calmness and solidity. Instead he responded to an image of Michelangelo, developed by the writer Stendhal and others, that emphasized powerful emotion and drama over tranquillity and stillness.⁶ In part, this changing perception of sculpture grew out of the division of labor between the sculptor and the *praticien*. This development ruptured the necessary alliance between the artist and his material in the nineteenth century,⁷ and the belief in the material ruling the conception and finish of sculpture had to be abandoned. As a result, the sculptor was free to leave the confines of cold, still marble and to attain a new level of expression. The sculptor became the progenitor of the conception, the creative genius. In the writing of Stendhal and Hippolyte Taine, Michelangelo began to represent the free expression of intense emotion through sculpture rather than icy perfection.

In his book *History of Painting in Italy* (1817), reprinted in 1854, the novelist Stendhal devoted much of his study to Michelangelo. Neither still nor timeless, Michelangelo's sculpture directly expressed the artist's reaction to the world that shaped him. In his book, Stendhal turned his thoughts to his own era and exhorted contemporary artists to accept the challenge of Michelangelo and express their response to the new century. He wrote:

For two centuries a certain politeness has banished strong passions. In the process of restraining them, it has annihilated them. . . . But the nineteenth century is going to take back what is rightfully its own. If a Michelangelo were born to us today, to what point should he succeed? What torrent of new sensations and pleasures would he lavish upon this public so well prepared by theatre and novels?⁸

In this passage, Stendhal invoked Michelangelo as a guide to modern artists who should dare to confront the physical and emotional realities of modern life. Strong passions and torrents of sensation supplant the sobriety and stillness of sculpture. Significantly the critic Gustave Geoffroy would use this para-

graph to open his essay on Rodin for the Monet / Rodin exhibition of 1889, making the association of the two sculptors perfectly explicit.

Hippolyte Taine, Stendhal's protégé, published an account of Italian art, *Philosophy of Art in Italy*, in 1865. In Taine's eyes, reason ruled the contemporary age, but sensation and experience governed the Renaissance and, hopefully, the future to which he aspired.⁹ Rather than focus on Michelangelo, Taine studied Benvenuto Cellini, whom writers conventionally associated directly with Michelangelo in the nineteenth-century. He contrasted the dispassionate idealism of the Academic style with Cellini's method, stating succinctly, "We reason and he sees."¹⁰ Taine explained that, "always in [Cellini's] work, the gesture and the cut followed the thought immediately, as an explosion follows the spark."¹¹ He envisioned a seamless flow from observation, through response, to the creation of expressive form. There was no need force a sculpture into a set of conventional poses and stock expressions associated with Academic art. Instead Cellini indicated his direct reaction to the model and his own emotion as he worked.

In the year before his trip to Italy, two major Parisian journals published monograph issues devoted to Michelangelo and the anniversary celebration in Florence. The mainstream *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* reviewed the festivities and offered readers a biographical sketch and lengthy summations of Michelangelo's work as a painter, sculptor, poet, and architect.¹² A brand new progressive publication, *L'Art*, took Michelangelo as its guiding spirit and included an engraving of *Moses* on its cover.¹³ Both publications presented an image of Michelangelo and his work that coincided with the conceptions of Stendhal and Hippolyte Taine.

Rodin traveled to Italy during a period of difficulty. His professional partnership modeling architectural sculpture in Brussels was dissolving, while his private work was at an impasse and went unnoticed by the public. He hoped that his encounter with ancient works and Michelangelo would provide him with some direction. He wrote to Rose Beuret that he had been studying Michelangelo and hoped that the "great magician" would "leave me a few of his secrets."¹⁴ He encountered Michelangelo as constructed by the nineteenth-century authors. The Renaissance sculptor stood for an idea of modernity and

⁶ The term "image" in this context encompasses both the persona of Michelangelo and his sculptures that critics saw as an extension of his identity. Consequently, this image is a mental conception of the artist and his work held in common by members of particular artistic circles and emblematic of their basic orientation toward sculpture.

⁷ For a thorough discussion of these issues, see Anne Wagner *Carpeaux*. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986) 29-63.

⁸ Gustave Geoffroy, introduction, *Claude Monet, A. Rodin* reprinted in *Rodin In Perspective* ed. Ruth Butler, trans. John Anzalone. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980) 47. See also Stendhal, *La Peinture en Italie*, vol. 2, Stendhal Oeuvres Complètes (1816; Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1969) 190.

⁹ In his belief that one could distill the spirit of an age, Taine followed the

lead of Jacob Burckhardt, whose *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) characterized Michelangelo's time as the era of the individual.

¹⁰ Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophie de L'Art en Italie*, (1865; Paris: Éditions d'Aujourd'hui, 1984) 122. Author's translation.

¹¹ Taine 127-8.

¹² See *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 2nd period, vol. 13 (1876).

¹³ See *L'Art*, vol. 1, part 3 (1875) and *L'Art*, vol. 2, part 3 (1875).

¹⁴ Auguste Rodin, *Correspondance de Rodin: I*, ed. Alain Beausire and Hélène Pinet (Paris: Éditions du Musée Rodin, 1985) 13. Author's translation.

progress. He again assumed the role that Vasari had cast him in centuries before as the savior of art. In 1889, Rodin recalled his initial response when he told Truman Bartlett that when he saw the Medici Chapel he was “more profoundly impressed than with anything I have ever seen.”¹⁵ However, Rodin also responded to Michelangelo on a more technical level making sketches from memory to uncover the principles that governed Michelangelo’s compositions.¹⁶

Instead of finding a new path, Rodin recognized a validation of his own approach and consequently an artistic heritage in Michelangelo. Initially Michelangelo’s work, particularly the Medici Chapel, puzzled Rodin. He described his consternation in his interview with Paul Gsell, published under the title *Art*, in 1900. He said:

When I went to Italy myself, I was disconcerted before the works of Michelangelo since I had my mind full of Greek models I had studied passionately at the Louvre. At every turn, Michelangelo’s figures contradicted the truth I thought I had finally acquired. “Well!” I said to myself, “why this incurvation of the torso? Why this raised hip? . . .” I was quite confused.¹⁷

However, in an 1889 interview with Truman Bartlett, published in *The American Architect and Building News*, Rodin told the writer that he had found an answer to his questions. The principle that Rodin discovered, the “great magician’s secret,” was nature.

The strange contortions and weird curves had their basis in natural motion, the source from which Rodin also preferred to work. Rodin explained that the Michelangelo’s principles of composition:

. . . are found in nature, or she verifies them, if you look carefully enough. They are so simple that they can be taught in six months to any student of average intelligence, so that he can exemplify them, as facts, almost as well as I can myself. Nature in a word tells the whole story [*sic*].¹⁸

His statements concerning Michelangelo and nature date from 1889 and 1900, years when Rodin’s prestige and position were unquestioned, so perhaps he constructed this relationship to enhance his own prestige. However, Rodin’s argument concerning the basis of Michelangelo’s art never wavered. That consis-

tency suggests that Rodin’s perceptions were long-standing and reflect his early training and initial experience in Italy.

Rodin acquired his appreciation of natural stances and unexpected contortions of the human body in motion, the fugitive motion of the body from his drawing master Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran at the Petite École.¹⁹ Under Lecoq’s tutelage, Rodin learned to visually break down form into component parts and to reconstitute it from memory, but he also learned to work from the human body in motion. To move his students beyond mere recording of images, Lecoq took them to draw out-of-doors in natural surroundings with nude or draped models moving about freely. “Often,” Lecoq wrote, “we would stop one of them with a shout and beg him to stay a moment in some chance attitude that had struck us all.”²⁰

The identical freedom and naturalness of Rodin’s models struck Paul Gsell with their stark contrast to the orderly, frozen poses of most atelier models. He observed that they wandered about Rodin’s atelier and the sculptor seemed to wait until one struck an interesting pose before beginning to work. He commented, “the models seem to give orders to you rather than you giving orders to them.” Rodin, who was wrapping his figurines with wet cloths, answered softly: “I do not take orders from them but rather from Nature.”²¹ In his training and practice, Rodin turned to nature and he recognized in Michelangelo’s work the same power of the unexpected, natural stance. This experience validated the forms and technique that Rodin had learned to appreciate and employ when he was a student at the Petite École.

This experience bore fruit almost immediately in the form of *The Age of Bronze* (Figure 1), 1876-1877. In Rodin’s earliest life-sized sculpture, dubbed “Michelangelesque,” the sculptor courageously completed and exhibited a statue that obeyed no accepted rules of propriety. The somnolent figure stands quietly in a completely ambiguous pose that bears no association with sculptural rhetoric or tradition. Rodin began the difficult sculpture in 1875, but could complete only after his return from Italy.

In Rodin’s eyes, following nature set Michelangelo apart from the Academic tradition, and this coincided with Stendahl’s association of Michelangelo with artistic progress. Rodin drew the contrast between the Academic style and true respect for nature in his interview with Gsell. He told Gsell that the Academic artists “correct, castrate Nature, reducing it to dry cold contours, whose very regularity has little to do with reality.”²²

¹⁵ Truman H. Bartlett, “Auguste Rodin, Sculptor,” *The American Architect and Building News*, vol. 25 (January 19-June 15, 1889) 64.

¹⁶ Bartlett 64.

¹⁷ Paul Gsell, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell* trans. Jacques de Caso and Patricia B. Sanders (1911; Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1984) 92.

¹⁸ Bartlett 65.

¹⁹ Lecoq was well-known in Paris as an innovative drawing master who

espoused the benefits of training the visual memory in his instructional pamphlet, *L’Éducation de la mémoire pittoresque* published in 1847. For an account of his method in practice see Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, “Lecoq de Boisbaudran and Memory Drawing,” *The European Realist Tradition*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982).

²⁰ Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, *The Training of the Memory in Art and the Education of the Artist*, trans. L.D. Luard (London: Macmillan, 1911) 30.

²¹ Gsell 11.

If one followed nature's principles and abandoned the dry Academic style, then the sculptor would truly emulate the art of the Greeks and Michelangelo. To summarize his view Rodin stated: "Whereas life animates and warms the palpitating muscles of Greek statues, the inconsistent dolls of academic art seem frozen by death."²³

However, Rodin also discovered that Michelangelo could offer his own work a link with the past that his lack of success at the Grande École had denied him. Rodin explained to Truman Bartlett that Michelangelo's association with natural motion did not derive from direct observation but from a long tradition of sculpture. He offered an explanation of Michelangelo's method:

I was struck with the idea that these principles were not original with him but the result of discoveries made by those who had preceded him. . . . He seems to have worked little from nature. . . .and that he took entire figures from Donatello. . . .²⁴

Through nature, the qualities of Michelangelo's sculpture could be associated with the Greeks, but Michelangelo's method, as understood by Rodin, required a second involvement with history through Donatello. Rodin and Michelangelo were linked by a respect for natural motion and vibrant figures, but Rodin would strengthen the bond by borrowing from Michelangelo, as Michelangelo had borrowed from Donatello. Rodin seemed almost obsessed with heritage as he continually took figures from Michelangelo and repeated them in his own work. One only need consider works such as the *Titans*, 1877 (Figure 2), created for Sèvres while Rodin worked under Carrier-Belleuse, and its derivation from the Sistine *ignudi* or the console shape of *The Thinker*, 1880 (Figure 3), and its association with *Lorenzo de' Medici* from the Medici Chapel, to recognize the extent of Rodin's debt to the past.

In conclusion Rodin's response to Michelangelo's sculpture involved much more than seeing the work *in situ* for the first time. Rodin did not respond to the sobriety and stillness of the work in the manner of Diderot or Baudelaire. Instead Rodin confronted sculptures that evoked the modern, highly expressive image of Michelangelo proposed by Stendhal and his successors. In addition Rodin found an historic lineage for his innovation. Michelangelo's work offered a precedent for the progressive quality of Rodin's training, studio method, and sculpture. Instead of being alone, excluded from the Grande École and the Salon, he found a way to participate in the mainstream and to be part of the orthodox tradition of European sculpture.

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²² Gsell 23.

²³ Gsell 24.

²⁴ Bartlett 64.

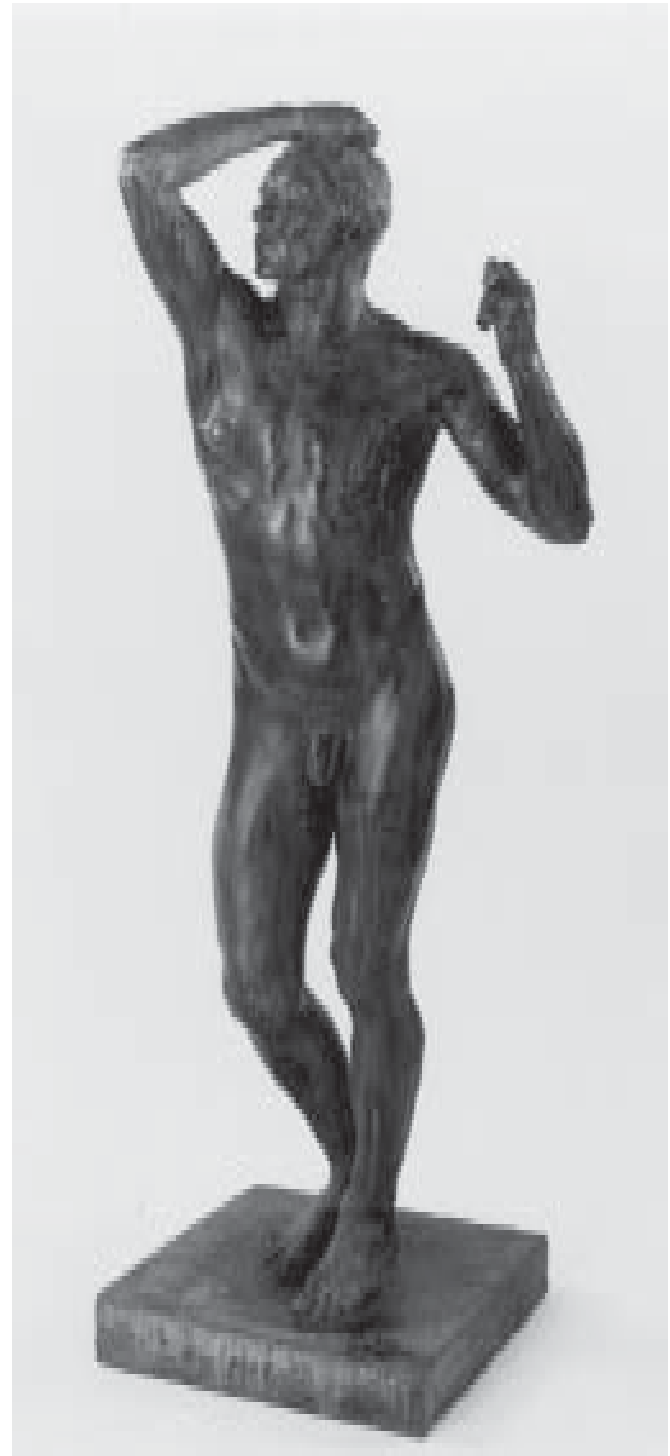


Figure 1. Auguste Rodin, *The Age of Bronze*, bronze, height 67". Founder: Rudier, 1875-76. The Rodin Museum, Philadelphia: Gift of Jules E. Mastbaum.



Figure 2. Auguste Rodin, French, 1840-1917. *Titans*, 1877, glazed earthenware, 36.8 x 33.5 x 35.6 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1998, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund, 1995.71



Figure 3. Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker*, bronze, height 79". Founder: Rudier, 1880. The Rodin Museum, Philadelphia: Gift of Jules E. Mastbaum.