

Les Halles Anniversary  
 La Table de Claire  
 In the Vincennes-ity  
 Osmothèque  
 Galerie Slomka  
 A Model Painter

Euro May 26: .715  
 Euro April 27: .767  
 Rain Days: 12  
 High Temp: 73°F/23°C  
 Low Temp: 55°F/13°C  
 Nat'l Holidays: June 1

# PARIS

---

## n o t e s

JUNE 2009

VOLUME 18 ISSUE 5

# CHEZ RODIN

By Mary McAuliffe

He never lived here, but the Hôtel Biron, now the Musée Rodin, was the artist's favorite studio

He was born into poverty in the Rue Mouffetard quarter of Paris but ended in triumph at the Hôtel Biron. This beautiful mansion, now the Musée Rodin, has become permanently linked with his name. In between lay a saga of struggle and perseverance, for this particular genius did not emerge quickly from anonymity.

Rue de l'Arbalète (5th), the tiny street where Auguste Rodin was born in 1840, may look charming now, but then it was a slum—originally part of a village surrounding the old church of Saint-Médard and the old Roman road to Orléans. It was, and still is, a bustling place, the sort of environment that would quicken the imagination of an intelligent child. But as a youngster, Rodin showed no particular aptitude for anything. The third child and only son of a lowly office-worker at the Préfecture de Police, Rodin seemed distinctly unpromising. Perhaps, though, his inability to read, write or do sums was simply a sign of his complete indifference to those subjects. From an early age, the only thing that genuinely interested him was drawing.

He wanted to draw, and he wanted to become an artist. Finally, at a loss for any other alternative, his despairing father at last agreed to send him to the Free School of Design (Ecole Gratuite de Dessin), then located in the former School of Surgery at 5 Rue de l'Ecole-de-Médecine (6th). There, this ungainly lad with carrot-colored hair labored to make his mark. He quickly learned that the school's goal was to produce craftsmen—highly skilled young men prepared to join the ranks of Parisian artisans who specialized in one of the decorative arts. Those training to become ornamental carvers could take classes in sculpturing, and it was in such a class that Rodin, after mastering the basic drawing classes, first encountered modeling clay. "I felt as if I were ascending into heaven," he later wrote, describing how he "grasped the whole thing in a flash." It was more than a revelation—it was

a calling. He would be a sculptor. But many years would lie between this epiphany and his first real success.

At first he immersed himself in the Louvre, filling his sketchbook with drawings, and took live-model classes. Encouraged by his progress, he then applied for admission to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which rejected him—not once,



but three times. Already, Rodin was showing far too much independence for the classically entrenched academics at the Beaux-Arts; they found his emerging naturalism completely out of step with their traditionalism. It would have been enough to crush a less determined spirit, but Rodin refused to give up. He spent the next 20 years supporting himself—just barely—in the decorating end of the building trades, where he concentrated on adding to his impressively growing technique. One wonders how many public monuments and buildings were repaired by or given standardized ornaments from Rodin during these hardscrabble years. It is believed that he sculpted the decorative motifs on the façade of the sumptuous Hôtel de Paiva (25 Avenue des Champs-Élysées) as well as the statue of d'Alembert on the reconstructed Hôtel de Ville, wedged among 109 similar statues.

It was during these years that Rodin began to fill in the sizable gaps in his education,

learning to read with comprehension and gravitating towards the passionate poetry of Hugo and Lamartine. Within this same time frame, he encountered and began to live with a young woman named Rose Beuret, who gave birth to his son, Auguste. Rodin refused to legitimize the boy—the first of many hardships and indignities that Rose would suffer during her 52 years as the sculptor's faithful helpmeet.

During the siege of Paris and the Commune uprising, Rose stayed in Paris, caring for Rodin's parents as well as her son, while Rodin found work in Brussels, where he remained for several years. Towards the end of his stay, when he was 35, he reached a major turning point in his career: at long last he cracked open the gates of the hidebound Salon. After having been flatly rejected by the Salon several years earlier, he submitted the same bust, this time in marble, and was accepted. His sculpture was not the sort of classical subject that the Salon preferred, but it unquestionably possessed a certain classical dignity, although its model had been a local drifter with a broken nose. The bust was titled simply that—"The Man with the Broken Nose."

Although Rodin did not yet know it, his most difficult days were now behind him. Certainly, he was ready to return to Paris. But first he embarked on a long-desired trip to Italy, walking a good portion of the way. Although he had many goals in mind, Michelangelo in particular was pulling him southward. Rodin wanted to see his work in real life, not simply in pictures, and once in Florence, he wrote Rose that he was hard at work studying Michelangelo, trying to understand him. "I believe," he told Rose, "that the great magician is revealing a few of his secrets to me..."

Before his Italian trip he had begun work on a full-size sculpture of a man, using a Belgian soldier as his model. Upon his return, he finished the work and showed it at a Belgian exhibition, where it (continued on page 7)

aroused admiration as well as suspicion. How could anyone, his critics whispered, create such a sculpture without casting it from life—that is, making it from plaster casts of the model. Rodin was deeply disturbed by this charge, which called his artistic integrity as well as his ability into question. The issue continued to dog him when he subsequently submitted the statue to the Salon under the title “The Bronze Age.”

The Salon’s jury accepted Rodin’s creation, but as this vibrant sculpture from an unknown sculptor started to attract attention, the rumors that Rodin had cast it “from life” began to circulate once more. This scandal blazed throughout artistic circles, and there was talk of withdrawing the sculpture from the Salon. At this point, fortunately, several prominent artists came to Rodin’s defense, and the tempest subsided.

Rodin won the battle, and having won, he benefited from the ugly controversy that had at first threatened his career. Whether or not Oscar Wilde was right in observing that the only thing worse than being talked about was not being talked about, Rodin now found a public that was aware of him and his prodigious talents. Three years after the controversy, the French state extended its blessing and purchased a bronze cast of “The Bronze Age” for the Luxembourg gardens. It now stands in Paris’ Musée Rodin.

From Rodin’s modest birthplace in the 5th arrondissement to the Hôtel Biron at the pinnacle of his career, there is a pattern to his life, which geographically revolved around Paris’ Left Bank. He and his parents lived at several locations in the Saint-Médard and Panthéon area, and upon returning from Belgium, he and Rose lived at several addresses along Rue St-Jacques (5th) and Rue du Faubourg-St-Jacques (14th). After residing in another of Rodin’s favorite Left-Bank quarters, on the Rue des Grands-Augustins (6th) near the Seine, he and Rose eventually followed the course of so many other successful members of the Parisian artistic and literary community by acquiring a country residence near Paris—the Villa des Brillants, in Meudon.

Proximity to Paris was important to Rodin, who came into the city daily to work at one or another of his many studios. These, much like his string of residences, were on the Left Bank, whether in the Gobelins quarter or Montparnasse (where the preserved atelier of Rodin’s protégé, Antoine Bourdelle, in the Musée Bourdelle, gives a feeling for Rodin’s vanished studios nearby). The size and quantity of Rodin’s production required numerous workshops. His ateliers also provided privacy in which to meet his mistresses, especially his great love, Camille Claudel. A gifted sculptor in her own right, Claudel shared his life for more than a decade and inspired some of his most impassioned works.

Claudel and Rodin worked together and made passionate love at various Left-Bank retreats. These included the studios that the government provided Rodin at its Dépôt des Marbres, where he labored for years on his monumental “The Gates of Hell”—a huge and overwhelmingly intricate structure that contained a wealth of individual masterpieces, most especially “The Thinker.” The Dépôt, which occupied the site now inhabited by the Musée du Quai Branly, is long gone, but Rodin kept his studios there to the end—even after he discovered the Hôtel Biron.

And the Hôtel Biron was unquestionably a remarkable discovery. Rodin learned of it in 1908 from the young German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who for a time had served as



Rodin’s secretary. A magnificent 18th-century structure, the mansion had acquired its name from an early owner, the Duc de Biron, who was responsible for its much-admired gardens. Unfortunately, by the time Rodin arrived, both mansion and gardens were in a sad state. For years the property had been rented out to uncaring tenants, and its last owners, the sisters of the Sacré Cœur, had turned it into a tough-minded boarding school for girls. Banishing all signs of luxury, including hot water and heat, the sisters sold off the mansion’s elegant paneling, its huge wall mirrors and its painted decorations (much of which the museum has since repurchased or reconstructed). They also built a chapel and boarding school (the present-day Lycée Victor Duruy) and allowed the grounds to run wild.

When the sisters and their school were evicted in 1905, following France’s secularization of education, the building’s demolition seemed imminent. But for the moment, anyone interested in low rents and plenty of atmosphere was welcome. Drawn by the mansion’s decaying beauty, an artistic crowd began to move in. Rilke lived upstairs, while Isadora Duncan conducted a dance school below. Henri Matisse set up a studio in what had been the boarding school, while young Jean Cocteau rented a room whose windows overlooked the mansion’s romantically overgrown grounds, evocative of the enchanted garden in his future film “La Belle et la Bête.”

Rodin took one look and immediately

rented the large ground-floor rooms facing the garden. He never lived here, but this was his favorite studio, where he worked and received visitors almost daily. And always, he loved to finish his day in the garden, drinking in its luxuriant stillness.

But the property was too valuable to let sit for long, and soon the house was scheduled for demolition. Through his connections (and he had acquired some good ones), Rodin was temporarily able to stave off this disaster, but at length he realized that the only way to save the Hôtel Biron would be by proposing to bequeath all his works and his considerable collections to the state, in return for permission to stay there until his death. He would get his beloved Hôtel Biron, and the world would get a Rodin museum.

The process was a long one, complicated by war and a lingering hostility toward Rodin’s art, which still shocked a number of people. But in the end, this is exactly what happened. And so, as visitors today enter this restored mansion through its rose gardens, they have the privilege and pleasure of viewing Rodin’s finest and most famous works in the setting he so loved.

There, in Room 1, is “The Man with the Broken Nose.” Ahead, in that mirrored corner room, is “The Age of Bronze.” Beyond is “The Kiss”—watch people’s eyes light up as they spot it. And in the center room is Rodin’s headless “Walking Man.” (“The head?” Rodin retorted to a disgruntled onlooker. “The head is everywhere.”) And always, note the hands—so important with Rodin. Here they form “The Cathedral” and “The Secret.”

The garden and pool stretch invitingly through the windows, but the special room devoted to works by Camille Claudel lies ahead. Among them is Claudel’s bust of Rodin, which was the only portrait of himself that he ever liked. Her own portrait bust, by Rodin, is in Room 8a, at the end.

Upstairs, beyond the magnificent staircase, are early models for “The Thinker” and “The Burghers of Calais,” as well as a splendid bust of Victor Hugo. And more treasures, many more, enhance the grounds, including Rodin’s daring sculpture of Balzac, his beloved “The Thinker” and the work he did not live to see cast in bronze: “The Gates of Hell.”

Rodin died in 1917, only a few months after Rose (whom he finally married, days before she died). They are buried together at the Villa des Brillants, which has its own Rodin museum (largely of models, or “maquettes”). But it is at the Hôtel Biron where the arc of Rodin’s life and work appears most vividly. This is the mansion that marked his triumph. And it is here, almost a century after his death, that a devoted public continues to come to enjoy his creations and to pay him tribute.

•Musée Rodin: 79 Rue de Varenne, 7th.  
Site: [www.musee-rodin.fr](http://www.musee-rodin.fr)