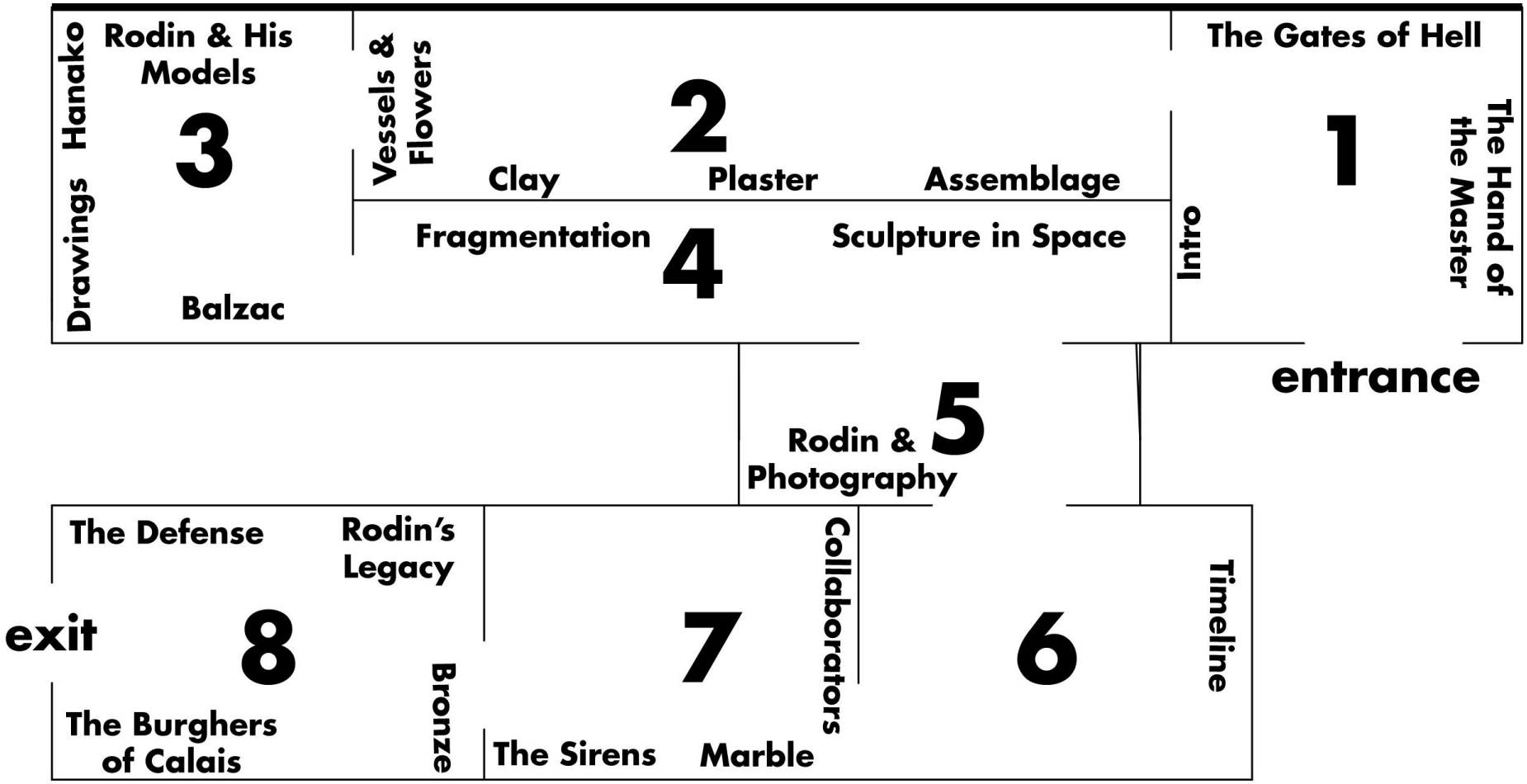
Though French sculptor Rodin was recognized in his lifetime as a genius, and his work continues to be famous throughout the world, little is known about his artistic process and studio practices. Even today, there is a great deal of confusion about his methods and production that raises a number of questions about the original works and Rodin's direct hand in creating them, as well as the bronze castings made after his death.

In the 19th century, sculpture was an art of reproduction and editions. Then, as now, it is a physically demanding and technically complex art, requiring a team of assistants. A large studio like Rodin's, which employed as many as fifty people by 1900, succeeded through the efforts of live models, clay beaters, plaster casters, stone carvers, in addition to bronze casters, pointers, and patinators and, in Rodin's case, photographers. Part artist and part entrepreneur, Rodin supervised this large company as they translated his clay models into other materials. The artist invented the form, whereas his assistants executed it, a practice many sculptors continue to this day.

This exhibition, organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Musée Rodin in Paris, provides a new perspective on the collaborative nature of Rodin's artistic process and explores his treatment of materials through a range of experimental practices—assemblages, fragmentation, enlargements, and more—that revolutionized the language of sculpture.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THE HAND OF THE MASTER

For Rodin, the hand represented not only his primary sculpting tool and a key artistic subject—but his signature. In *The Hand of God,* Rodin audaciously asserts his right to create the divine image. The hand is not literally his, but he is its designer, the artist whose imagination has realized the bold act of creation.

The sculptor began modeling his own hands in marble in 1900, and he went on to produce dramatic studies of hands in caressing, imploring, or menacing forms, deliberately altering their scale to accentuate the expression of a gesture. Reluctant to show these highly personal studies, he preferred to keep these enigmatic "little things" to himself and displayed them only twice in his lifetime.

THE GATES OF HELL

In 1880, Rodin received his first public commission, which was to create massive bronze doors for a Museum of Decorative Arts that the French government planned to build in Paris and open for the Universal Exposition of 1889. However, ministerial changes and a financial crisis delayed and then ultimately canceled the project. Rodin retained full ownership of his monument and continually worked on the plaster version of *The Gates of Hell* in his Dépôt des Marbres studio until his death.

Rodin took his inspiration from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno,* the first part of his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Rather than illustrating the poet's journey through one of the nine circles of hell, Rodin portrays the bodies of the damned in turmoil, writhing across the seemingly boundless, teeming surfaces of the doors.

Over the course of thirty-seven years, Rodin modeled "a crowd of figures," and several became separate sculptures through Rodin's use of recycling, assemblage, enlargement, and fragmentation—all practices examined in the following galleries. Though individual figures or groupings such as *The Thinker,* were often exhibited, discussed, and sold to art collectors, the work as a whole remained mysterious and off-limits to the public. Rodin kept it in his studio as he modified elements of the plaster models. For this reason, *The Gates of Hell* appears to be Rodin's greatest and most emblematic work, an essential document of the creative urge within the studio, where everything was transformed and brought to life by the sculptor who dared to compare himself to God.

ASSEMBLAGE

Rodin continually reinvented his practice of sculpture through assemblage, the innovative process of combining and reconfiguring entire sculptures or fragments with other ready-made pieces. This practice is the very heart of Rodin's creative process. The sculptures in this gallery—many of which result from varied combinations of diverse fragments and compositions—reveal how Rodin constantly put forms together, broke them apart, and reconfigured them. Exploring assemblage pushed Rodin's work in directions that redefined sculpture as always in transition and therefore forever unfinished—a very modern concept.

Hundreds of plaster heads, hands, feet, arms, and legs—described by the artist as *abattis* (limbs)—made up a stockpile of "spare parts" in his studio that inspired his studies of form and composition. These limbs provide us with an idea of the wealth of carefully observed poses employed by the sculptor to give life to his creations. Through mixing, recycling, and grafting selected limbs, Rodin gave these basic forms—many of them initially conceived for *The Gates of Hell*—fresh symbolic meaning with each new assemblage.

Studio assistant Viktor Frisch described Rodin's vast collection of forms cast with the intention of future reuse:

> He had several plaster casts made. One was kept intact, the others were cut apart, and the sections numbered and catalogued, so that they might be drawn out of their cupboards to serve in other figures, perhaps years later. Thus dissected, limb from torso, they would be set, again and again, in new arrangements and further thoughtful groupings.

CLAY

Rodin was primarily a modeler in clay or plaster—he left casting in bronze and carving marble to his assistants, as was typical of 19th-century sculptors. He worked clay with extraordinary virtuosity from a live, nude model. Because of the fragility of clay once it dries, a mold of the clay model was taken, enabling what was called the “original” cast to be made in plaster. The clay itself was inevitably destroyed during the removal of the mold, and thus a key aspect of Rodin’s creative act—undoubtedly the most authentic and direct—is lost. Fortunately, studio photographs—shown later in this exhibition—document Rodin’s working methods as well as some of his lost artworks.

PLASTER

Before Rodin, plaster was a common, but essential, material for sculptors. Fragile in nature, it was mainly used for making replicas of clay originals and preparing a work for bronze casting or carving in marble, but never as a medium for finished works. Rodin, however, saw many advantages to sculpting in plaster. Before drying, it is flexible and malleable; once dry, it is light but solid, allowing other elements to be attached to it. It can also be easily cut and put back together, making endless variations possible. Rodin capitalized on these qualities using his practice of fragmentation and assemblage to create new compositions. Lending a new aesthetic dimension to plaster by leaving the cast seams exposed, Rodin also ennobled the material, asserting the beauty of his work in and of itself. The importance of these plasters—sometimes mistakenly confused with mere copies—would not be understood until much later, when art historians realized that they provided the most faithful evidence of Rodin's own hand.

VESSELS AND FLOWERS

During his life, Rodin assembled a collection of over six thousand antiquities. Between 1893 and 1917 he purchased hundreds of fragments of Egyptian, Greek, Hellenistic, Etruscan, and Roman works in marble or bronze, as well as vessels and other figurines in terracotta or stone.

Beginning in the 1890s, Rodin combined these antique vessels with his own figures, audaciously mixing these different historical styles within single sculptures. Several of the resulting compositions—like *The Small Water Fairy* shown here—were later executed in marble or bronze. The allusions to antiquity embodied in these composite works do not detract from their modernity—these delightful and idiosyncratic assemblages demonstrate completely new effects of scale, fragmentation, surface texture, and color.

RODIN
AND HIS MODELS

Confessing his "infinite worship of the nude," Rodin could not work without a model and chose them for their character and vigor. Preferring those who lacked experience, he objected to the usual "lifeless automatons" who worked in art schools, where sculptors were obliged to conform to the standard repertoire of academic poses. When he could afford it, the spectacle of several models moving in erotic, acrobatic, and exotic poses energized the sculptor, who quickly fixed their poses in clay or sketched them without turning away to look at his drawing.

His earliest male models were Bibi, the street-sweeper with the battered face; César Pignatelli, a long-haired, wiry Italian man who was the model for *Saint John the Baptist*; Cailloux, the athletic circus performer who contorted his body for *Adam*; and the Belgian soldier Auguste Neyt, who posed for *The Age of Bronze*.

Rodin had affectionate, though paternalistic, relationships with his female models. He hired Rose Beuret as a model when he was a penniless young sculptor, and the girl of rustic charm became his longtime partner.

Unconventional dancers also inspired Rodin, from the "unbourgeois" passion of flamenco performers and the classically inspired Isadora Duncan to the hypnotic Loïe Fuller and the modern Ruth St. Denis. Other models included the formidable Hanako, "rooted in the ground like a tree" during posing sessions; the agile Alda Moreno, whose strange arabesques suggested "sphinx-like creatures from which a woman emerges as from a chrysalis"; and Cambodian dancers who gave him "new reasons to believe that nature is an exhaustible spring for those who drink from it."

Rodin valued his completed works for what they were, not what they illustrated, writing,

> Sir, I am embarrassed to tell you the subjects: graceful women and muscled men. . . . I would point out to you that the subject is of no interest in my works. It is the life animating them that merits my being known.

HANAKO

Rodin first met the Japanese actress and dancer Ōta Hisa (1868–1945), known professionally as Hanako, at the 1906 Colonial Exhibition in Marseilles. Hanako's performance style bore no relation to Western conventions and was extremely popular with French society at a time when interest in other cultures contributed to Japonisme—a taste for Japanese art, aesthetics, and distinct traditions. Mesmerized by Hanako's intense look of anguish as she performed scenes of *hara-kiri* (ritual suicide by disembowelment with a sword), the sculptor pressed her to pose for him.

These portraits of Hanako explore the metamorphoses of a face and exemplify the collaborative nature of Rodin's work with his models. However, viewing theses works as mere examples of Japonisme is too simplistic: here the concerted quest to articulate human emotion as realistically as possible is a universal desire.

DRAWINGS

Drawing played a central role in Rodin's approach to art:

> Having begun drawing very young, I brought everything I knew to the modeling of my figure. In my life, I have made thousands of drawings; even now I still draw almost every day. I could not tell you how much that knowledge has served me.

Rodin's graphic work parallels his sculpture in a number of ways: he only worked from a live model and avoided academic poses and stereotypes, seeking instead to capture the inherent dynamic quality of bodies. Concentrating all his attention on the body and the expression of its vital tension, Rodin developed compositions unencumbered by accessories or objects and sometimes lacking a background. He often reproduced the same motif in a series after the initial session with the model, each version of which could generate independent new works.

Another feature of Rodin's experimentation through drawing, which was similar to methods he used for his plaster works, was his strategy of découpage and reassembling. The bodies are sometimes roughly cut out and isolated from their base or rearranged in pairs.

The drawings selected for this exhibition illustrate the work carried out in the studio. The similarity among the types of paper and sizes, along with the models and the graphic styles used, present a coherent body of work developed within a limited time frame, which may come from the same sketchbook or sets of related sheets.

BALZAC

In 1890, when Rodin received the commission for a public statue honoring Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), opinions concerning the writer and his work were still divided. Émile Zola, a naturalist writer who considered Balzac the precursor of that literary movement, promoted his recognition and insisted that Rodin, then considered a master of realism, be selected to execute the work.

Rodin did extensive research on Balzac, amassing a great deal of documentation—books, photographs, descriptions of the writer, and garments—to form a clear idea of his subject. Rodin's first, realistic vision of the subject was viewed as vulgar and grotesque: it showed a body like Balzac's own, with a potbelly and two stubby legs. Later versions of the monument displayed in this exhibition demonstrate how Rodin moved away from realism towards idealistic expressionism. The artist did not strive for "photographically real sculpture," but instead chose to evoke the writer's force of genius and understanding of the human soul: "For me, Balzac is before everything a creator and this is the idea I would wish to make understood in my statue."

Although Rodin received the commission when naturalism was the style, he ultimately delivered an early masterwork of modernism. It was, for the artist, "the logical outcome of my whole life, the very pivot of my aesthetics."

MONUMENT TO BALZAC IN THE MAKING, 1891–98

Rodin labored over his *Monument to Balzac* for seven years. Throughout this process, he reconfigured and refined each component until the portrait evoked Balzac's visionary genius.

Rather than copying existing portraits of the writer, Rodin sought out Balzac's origins by studying regional physical types in his birthplace, the French province of Touraine. There, Rodin made several sketches of Estager, a stocky local man nicknamed "the conductor of Tours," who inspired the likeness of Balzac's face.

Rodin generally began a sculpture by producing numerous figure studies, devoting considerable thought to the pose of the nude body. Initially, he gave Balzac a prominent belly to symbolize the author's creative appetite.

Rodin replaced this figure with an athletic body, which firmly holds its own penis. This gesture reveals the sculptor's conception of sexuality as the source of creative power.

After arriving at this final design, he began to consider the most appropriate dress for Balzac. Early versions show the figure wearing a mid-19th-century frock coat; in others, it is draped in a Carthusian robe, the dressing gown Balzac wore while writing in his private study.

In the final sculpture, Rodin covered—but did not completely hide—the figure's sexual gesture with a voluminous, shapeless coat. This garment reflects Rodin's interest in the sculptural effect of plaster-soaked fabric draped over nude bodies, transforming the silhouette into a powerful dense monolith—a metaphor for the cloak of creative genius enveloping the writer's persona.

SCULPTURE IN SPACE: ENLARGEMENTS AND PEDESTALS

Ironically, at the same time the reduced versions of large or life-size sculptures were becoming more popular with art collectors, Rodin became interested in enlargements, in particular ones that turned the spotlight on his figures or body parts. Enlargement allowed the simplification of forms, accentuating their conceptual character. Such dramatic rescaling sometimes intensified the symbolically expressive power of a form. *The Walking Man,* for example, became iconic once it was enlarged in 1907, many years after its initial creation.

In 1894, Rodin began employing the services of the remarkable "reproductive sculptor" Henri Lebossé to translate his clay and plaster figures into different scales. Lebossé's most famous enlargement for Rodin is *The Thinker.* Originally conceived by Rodin at one-third life size as the crowning figure on *The Gates of Hell,* this meditative statue was unveiled at the Salon of 1904 in its new colossal size. The sculpture caused a sensation, provoking jeers—"a wild orangutan, a huge brute, a bloated boxer"—from some, and praise—"a new Hercules, a peasant philosopher"—from others.

Significantly, Rodin made the pedestal an integral part of *The Thinker* and several other sculptures. He used antique columns from his own collection or plinths made in the reproductions department of the Louvre as pedestals, which allowed him to play with height and scale and gave familiar figures such as *The Thinker*, fresh perspectives. Another radical option saw the rough, unworked material of the sculpture itself become the pedestal, as in *Thought*, based on a portrait of sculptor Camille Claudel.

FRAGMENTATION

Behind Rodin's aesthetic of the incomplete figure lies his passion for the often fragmentary sculpture of antiquity. As he put it, "A piece of beauty is beauty in its entirety." Rebelling against the prevailing notion that a sculpture should not be left mutilated or amputated, he was in this way closely akin to Michelangelo, who declined Pope Julius II's request to restore the *Belvedere Torso,* an ancient fragment that had then just been discovered.

Study of a Torso, a fragment that Rodin found in his studio and had cast about 1887, inspired great aesthetic experimentation for the sculptor. Rodin combined it with the legs from his *Saint John the Baptist,* and then placed that assemblage on a column in 1900, which was subsequently enlarged in 1907 to create *The Walking Man.* The resulting composite figure was scandalously iconoclastic at the time.

From the 1890s, Rodin reworked his existing sculptures, eliminating some of their elements to amplify their expressive power. An essential component of his redefinition of sculpture was to recognize the importance of chance and accident and making "pure sculpture." With this philosophy guiding his work, Rodin introduced profoundly modern ideas with respect to defining the art of sculpture.

RODIN AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In his early career, Rodin used photography to document his work, and over the years he maintained an increasingly inventive relationship with that medium. Photography was not only part of a modern practice of reproduction and dissemination, but also contributed to the creative process of the sculptor, who drew directly on or touched-up prints with pen or pencil to revise sculptural compositions. Rodin preferred that the photographers that worked with him produce unusual, blurry, and poetic views of his work rather than strict reproductions on a neutral background.

Eugène Druet (1867–1916), who ran a café in the Place de l'Alma district of Paris, was not a professional photographer when Rodin proposed that he work for him in 1896. That same year, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Musée Rath in Geneva, Rodin presented photographs alongside his sculptures and drawings for the first time. In 1900, Rodin repeated the novel experiment during his retrospective at Pavillon de l'Alma, and Druet displayed seventy-one photographs near the sculptures.

More than a century later, Druet's photographs still look strange, as they do not resemble typical reproductions of artworks. His choice of backgrounds, camera angles, framing, and lighting, find no equivalent in traditional photography. The critic Camille Mauclair understood that these images surrounded the sculptures with "the dreamy atmosphere they call for." Rodin, who did not like overly sharp renderings, impersonal backgrounds, or artificial lighting, thus imposed his aesthetic vision on Druet's photography. Both men signed the glass negatives, indicating that Rodin approved—and therefore had control over—every shot.

RODIN AND HIS COLLABORATORS

Even before Rodin's time, creating sculpture was a collaborative process, with sculptors using hired assistants to handle time-consuming, mechanical, or repetitive tasks. Likewise, Rodin surrounded himself with talented practitioners, including studio assistants, plaster casters, carvers, and founders, who turned his original models into finished sculptures under his supervision in his large, busy workshop. This studio system allowed Rodin to focus on generating concepts for sculptures and to sketch or work clay in the presence of models.

In Rodin's studio, the carving process began with pointers, assistants entrusted with rough-hewing marble blocks along guide-points established by Rodin. Next, skilled carvers and finishers shaped the stone into a faithful likeness of the artist's plaster model. They worked according to Rodin's express instructions, since during this refinement process he might decide to carve a certain area more deeply to play with what he termed the marble's "blond" or "soft" shadows.

Though some master-sculptors reserved the finishing stages for themselves, Rodin seems to have taken up the carving tools only on rare occasions. Because all studio activity took place under his strict control, however, the works realized by his highly trained assistants manifested his vision and style alone.

THE SIRENS

Characteristic of Symbolist spirit that blurred the boundaries between art and nature, these three Greek mythological figures, whose songs lured sailors into the abyss, captivate through deadly eroticism. Though sometimes entitled *The Nereids,* or sea nymphs, the figures do not possess traditional fishtails. In any case, Rodin usually attached little importance to titles.

Initially conceived for *The Gates of Hell*, this popular grouping was also produced independently in different materials. A plaster dates from 1887, whereas the first marble copy—almost certainly the one presented here—was carved by practitioner Jean Escoula in 1889. The bronze version was made nearly ten years after Rodin passed away by Eugène Rudier, his faithful bronze-caster who became Rodin's heir. Jean Limet, the likely caster and patinator, used every possibility offered by bronze to preserve the gentleness of the marble. In this respect the patina (surface finish) seems particularly well considered: its mottled green tones, which evoke the waves of the sea, are matched by subtle shades of gold in the sirens' hair.

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MARBLE

The mechanical methods and indirect means by which Rodin reproduced his plaster originals in marble became the subject of debate in the early 20th century, a period when direct carving was the vogue. As Rodin understood, however, such “translations” made by assistants was the usual practice in sculpture studios since the Renaissance, which produced the concept of the artist as an intellectual. Rodin closely supervised the carving of his marbles, but his genius in the medium depended on his vision for their creation, rather than the means by which his practitioners physically realized them.

Rodin also recognized the supremacy of ancient and Renaissance sculpture and, like the legendary sculptor Michelangelo, valued and used only the finest quality stone.

Inspired by Michelangelo’s unfinished works and ancient fragments, Rodin exploited the material itself, injecting it with symbolic meaning by emphasizing its surface qualities and the boundaries between the sculpture and its surroundings, especially in his use of the base. These radical formal lessons would hold great importance for later generations of modern artists who would work in completely different, even abstract, styles.

BRONZE

In the late 19th century, Rodin and other sculptors worked to meet the demands of the growing French middle class who sought small, decorative objets d'art to display in their homes. In the 1880s, Rodin recruited a group of founders to execute a few works that he could sell, as he did not have the finances to have them carved in marble. Although he worked with many different founders, including Jean-Baptiste Griffoul, Victor Thiébaut, and Léon Perzinka, Rodin had a special relationship with the Rudier firm. Alexis Rudier created the family sand-casting business in 1874. His brother, François, produced casts for Rodin from the 1880s on. Beginning in 1902, an important, friendly association formed between Rodin and Eugène Rudier, who respectfully kept his father's foundry mark, "Alexis Rudier / fondeur à Paris." In collaboration with the patinator Jean Limet, Eugène made close to five hundred casts under Rodin's supervision. At the request of the Musée Rodin, which held the right to produce posthumous bronze casts of the master's work, he continued to do so until his death in 1952.

The technique of sand-casting allowed bronze to be produced quickly and economically. In this process, a plaster model of the desired work (or a section of it) was encased in a sand mold and then removed. The cavity left behind by the model was filled with molten metal, which cooled to form a solidified casting. The grain size of the sand impacted the quality of the finish, and it could be easily redone if the quality of the cast was poor. Because the fragile model risks being damaged by the strenuous handling required by sand-casting, manufacturers of bronze sculptures typically cast a single, highly resistant metal proof from the plaster—called the master model—which then served as a reusable matrix. If the piece is not cast whole, the master model can be taken apart in as many pieces as required. In this way, many casts of high quality could be produced—and were. This final gallery encourages the visitor to discover differences between bronzes that at first glance may look identical.

THE DEFENSE

Entering competitions was one of the most effective ways for an artist to become known and receive commissions. In 1879 Rodin conceived *The Defense* or *The Call to Arms* for a monument commemorating the heroic defense of Paris, which had been under siege during the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71). This scene of tremendous tension, remarkable for its violence and drama, depicts a winged allegorical figure of War wearing the Phrygian cap of the Republic, howling out her thirst for vengeance.

Comparing the casts by bronze founders Léon Perzinka and Alexis Rudier exhibited here reveals the results of two different casting practices.

The older cast by Perzinka reveals an artisanal process. Perzinka, passionate about Rodin's work, worked alone in a minuscule studio. His bronze betrays his limited resources: the casting seams on the right arm, wings, and torso of the figure of War are still very apparent. Owing to their weight and the complexity of the process, the two figures were cast separately and then joined with lead-tin solder, which he concealed by over-painting in bronze tones. The daring craftsman's skill, however, soon began to show its limitations—a number of imperfections and accidents affecting various casts ultimately undermined Rodin's confidence in him.

By 1915 the Rudier foundry employed numerous workmen, and possessed the sophisticated and effective means necessary for casting this type of sculpture group. Its casts were more fluid and the seams practically invisible, while its patinas of green and brown-ochre conjure the tones Jean Limet developed for Rodin. These two versions of *The Defense* offers us an opportunity to look closely at these technical details and use our own judgment in respect to which sculpture affects us the most.

RODIN'S LEGACY: THE STUDIO-MUSEUM

Rodin mounted a major exhibition of his work at the Pavillon de l'Alma in Paris during the 1900 Universal Exposition. The large, airy and light-filled space he had built for his immaculate plasters was considered innovative. "For the first time, I have all of Rodin before my eyes," wrote a critic. "This is an art of power, life, passion, reaching the extreme limits of expressive intensity." No sculptor had ever organized such a retrospective for himself, and some referred to the exhibition as the "Rodin Museum," a combination of museum and studio that pleased the artist. In the end, that very idea was realized, thanks to the efforts of many of his friends.

In 1901, the sculptor decided to rebuild the pavilion in the garden of the villa and studio in Meudon where he lived and worked. In 1908, Rodin rented four south-facing, ground-floor rooms at the Hôtel Biron, beautiful 18th-century Parisian mansion that he would fully occupy and use as a studio space by 1911. Though Rodin seldom worked there, he resolved to create his museum in that prestigious setting and bequeathed all of his works, including drawings, sculptures, casts, molds, personal effects, and the rights to produce his sculpture to the French state. This donation—estimated to be worth several tens of millions—was finalized in 1916. Ever since, the Musée Rodin has been the guardian of the artist's memory and legacy and holds the rights to produce bronze casts of his sculptures. Rodin's studio lives on.

THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

France's secular Third Republic (1870–1940) celebrated its heroes—whether humble or glorious—by commissioning six times as many public monuments as any previous regime, and it was the ambition of every sculptor at that time to create one. After several failed attempts, Rodin finally received his first such commission in 1884.

Calais, the northern French industrial port city, sought to commemorate a major incident in its medieval history that took place during the Hundred Years War between France and England. After a year-long siege from 1346 to 1347, Edward III agreed to spare Calais from destruction on the condition that six of its leading citizens, or burghers, sacrifice themselves, bringing him the keys to the city and surrendering themselves to their fate. According to chronicler Jean Froissart, the wealthiest burgher, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, came forward and agreed: "I will willingly strip to my shirt, bare my head, and put the rope around my neck, at the mercy of the king of England." Jean d'Aire, Andrieu d'Andres, Jean de Fiennes, and Jacques and Pierre de Wissant immediately followed him. Queen Philippa de Hainaut, Edward's wife, moved by this heroic procession and fearful that their deaths would be a bad omen for her unborn child, persuaded her husband to exercise mercy and spared the men.

Rodin plunged zealously into this project. The committee in charge of the commission wished to erect a conventional monument showing the single figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Rodin, however, proposed that the six men be celebrated equally. Their sweeping, powerfully expressive gestures signify courage and resignation, despair and surrender. Together, they embody universal humanity. Each figure from *The Burghers of Calais* would become the source of independent fragments and enlargements, especially the heads and hands, enhancing Rodin's creations with a series of new works.