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Exhibitions

Interviews

Henry Moore talks about Rodin's irresistible influence – from the archive

Henry Moore and Alan Bowness

Rodin and Moore changed sculpture for ever. As their work comes together for the first time, we reprint a rare interview from 1976, in which Moore talks to future Tate director Alan Bowness about erotic excitement – and how Rodin ripped off Michelangelo

Henry Moore photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1951. Photograph: Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson

Rodin died on 17 November 1917, aged 77. Henry Moore was then 19, a soldier serving on the Italian front. He began our conversation by talking of his earlier encounter with Rodin. Moore has no recollection of learning of Rodin's death, though he was already well aware of the great sculptor's reputation.

Henry Moore: I certainly knew about Rodin. I remember my father showing me some photographs of his sculpture, and this may have been as early as 1924. And when I was demobilised in 1919 and went to the Leeds School of Art, I remember making a figure influenced by Rodin, a figure of an old man with a beard. He was very thin and scraggy, but he cracked, because I didn't know enough about armatures. Miss Gostick at Cardwell (Moore's art teacher at Castleford secondary school) had it in her house, on a shelf, until it disintegrated and fell apart. Then I did another piece influenced by Rodin, a head of a baby, also in 1919.

About this time I used to go to the Reference library I came across Rodin's book *Art* – as simple as that – the conversations with Paul Gsell. I read this book with great interest, remembering that it somewhere Rodin said that when he got stuck with modelling a clay sculpture, he would sometimes drop it on the floor and have another look. Now this was for me, as a young sculptor, a tremendous revelation of how you can take advantage of accidents, and how you should always try and look at a thing over again, with a fresh eye.

Alan Bowness: What happened when you got to London, as a student at the Royal College?

HM: I met people who knew Rodin, and that interested me. I remember Eric Maclagan (director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1924-45) talking about him, and I know that sculptors like Rodin had been in London and had walked these same little streets that I was walking – that was a very real thing for me. And I saw the works that he'd given to the V&A, and could study them. I had a great admiration for them at the time, though I never made any conscious imitation.

AB: There's usually a reaction against any great artist shortly after his death, and in Rodin's case this may have affected your generation in particular.

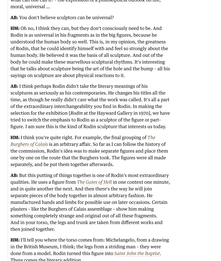
HM: I think we were all influenced by Rodin at first – even Brancusi. And it's true that sculptors were interested in primitive art and that this profoundly altered sculpture. But Rodin himself, somewhere in one of his conversations, refers to an early Greek or early Chinese sculpture, and said that this was what he would like to start from now. Towards the end of his life, he had come through to this point of view about sculpture.

But it's quite true that when I first went to Paris in the early 1920s I didn't think I went to Rodin's Rodin. I was much more interested in Brancusi and the Musée de l'Homme. It was the same with Michelangelo – when I was the travelling scholarship from the College, I did my best in the first two months in Italy to avoid seeing Michelangelo.

AB: That's just the opposite from Rodin, because when he went to Italy as a young sculptor, he was tremendously impressed by Michelangelo – as we can see from works like *The Age of Bronze* and *Saint John the Baptist*.

HM: I agree. Rodin was a tremendous amount to Michelangelo. But if you like something tremendously, you may react and think you're against it, but inside you can't get away from it. This is what happened to me with Rodin. Gradually, I began to realise that a lot of things one might be using and being influenced by – Negro sculpture for example, which gives you a simplified programme to work on – are, compared with Rodin, too easy, so in time has gone on, my admiration for Rodin has grown and grown.

AB: In some ways your own personal experience mirrors a change in the general reaction to Rodin. Don't you think it's easier for us to appreciate Rodin today than it was 30 years ago?



Auguste The Burghers Of Calais. Photograph: Alinari

HM: I doubt it. Perhaps for the general public, but I don't know about the young sculptors. And there's still that literary, pictorial side to Rodin's work, which we find in Victorian painting. This comes out especially in the carvings, which weren't actually touched by him. Rodin wasn't a carver.

AB: Can you define this Victorian flavour?

HM: Well it consists of the sort of thing you associate with Victor Hugo – what can one call it? – the expression of a philosophical outlook on life, moral, universal ...

AB: You don't believe sculpture has universal?

HM: Oh no, I think they can, but they don't consciously need to be. And Rodin is as universal in his fragments as in the big figures, because he understand the human body so well. This is, in my opinion, the greatness of Rodin, that he could identify himself with and feel so strongly about the human body. He believed it was the basis of all sculpture. And out of this body he could make these marvellous sculptural rhythms. It's interesting that he talks about sculpture being the art of the hole and the bump – all his sayings on sculpture are about physical reactions to it.

AB: I think perhaps Rodin didn't take the liberty necessary of his sculptures as seriously as his contemporaries. He changes his titles all the time, as though he really didn't care what the work was called. It's all part of the extraordinary interchangeability you find in Rodin. In making the selection for the exhibition [*Rodin at the Hayward Gallery*, in 1976], we have tried to switch the emphasis to Rodin as a sculptor of the figure or part figure. I am very fond of the kind of Rodin sculpture that interests us today.

HM: I think you're quite right. For example, the final grouping of *The Burghers of Calais* is an arbitrary affair. So far as I can follow the history of the commission, Rodin's idea was to make separate figures and place them one by one on the route that the burghers took. The figures were all made separately, and he put them together afterwards.

AB: But this putting of things together is one of Rodin's most extraordinary qualities. He used figures from *The Gates of Hell* in one context one minute, and in quite another the next. And then there's the way he will join separate pieces of the body together in almost arbitrary fashion. He manufactured hands and limbs for possible use on later occasions. Certain plasters – like the Burghers of Calais assemblage – show him making something completely strange and original out of all these fragments. And in your terms, the legs and trunk are taken from Rodin's work and then joined together.

HM: I'll tell you where the icon comes from: Michelangelo, from a drawing in the British Museum, I think, the legs from a striding man – they were done from a model. Rodin turned this figure into *Saint John the Baptist*. There comes the literary addition.

AB: Probably most of us prefer the *Walking Man* without a head and without arms to the figure of *John the Baptist* precisely because it hasn't got that literary association.

HM: I do, but I don't know how far we are in doing so. It's a problem of today, wanting to begin with the essence. A lot of young artists want to start with a simplified, boiled-down soup without ever having had the bones and stock to make it from. I don't know what to do about this.

AB: But can't one argue that some of the very late works, like the Dancers, are a kind of essential Rodin, when everything else has been distilled away?

HM: I don't believe the very late works are always the best. The little figure here on the table, I, for me, as good as the striding man, upstairs. This has a kind of tension and a hardness and a softness, a contrast of hole, soft flesh and tense muscle. But the latter work, I don't feel it is as good as this – it has squeezed soft clay through his hands.

AB: Like many of the drawings, the Dancers and the Walking Man are all very much concerned with the idea of movement. This is clearly of the greatest importance to Rodin, and it links him with the impressionist painters, just as other aspects of his work link him with the symbolists, who were also his contemporaries. But how far do you think the representation of movement is a proper concern of sculpture?

HM: This is one of the ways in which my generation does stand for a reaction against Rodin. One of my points is that sculpture should not represent actual physical movement. This is something I have never wanted. I believe that sculpture is made out of static, monumental form.

AB: What about *The Monument to Balzac*? Surely there Do you think, as many do, that it's the culmination of Rodin's work, or do you find it less interesting, because it's clothed, for one thing?

HM: No – because underneath you can see that there is the nude figure, and that it's been clothed. It's the same with the Burghers. What made Rodin the great sculptor that he is, is his complete understanding of the body's internal structure, his ability to feel inside into the sculpture. This is so intense – even the late work has got behind it all that other observation and knowledge of the human figure. He couldn't have simplified the Balzac – he couldn't have started with the idea of a draped figure. Think of all the studies that he had to make first.

AB: This is something one appreciates only if one visits the other Rodin Museum at Meudon, in the south-western suburbs of Paris, especially if one is shown the original molds for bronze casting still carefully preserved and the plaster casts Rodin used to make of work in progress ...

HM: Yes, it was visiting Meudon that made me understand one side of Rodin. Instead of the big official museum, one sees all the original platers, and I found little terracottas and other small things done by his own hand with a freshness some of the later bronze casts have lost.

AB: Were you not very impressed by seeing the succession of plaster casts Rodin would take of a head or a figure as he worked at it?

HM: Yes, this was an eye-opener to me. Of course it meant that he could keep his original, and yet alter it, and then go back if he liked to the old one. Usually when you alter something in sculpture, you've lost the first one. But Rodin's practice of taking casts meant that he could make his alterations and still keep the work that he started from.

AB: Have you ever done this?

HM: I have done it on occasion, yes. Though you can't do it with a carving, of course.

AB: There's another aspect of Rodin we haven't mentioned, that is his erotic side. This is something that matters very much for Rodin – he can revel in sensuality in a quite uninhibited way. What is your reaction to this?

HM: It is certainly very important for Rodin, though it doesn't excite or interest me very much, perhaps because one knows the human figure so well. But for Rodin I think this erotic excitement was a part of his support with the human figure. And he was unlike Cézanne, who had his erotic side but suppressed it. This doesn't make Cézanne less of a physical artist, and I don't think you need this obvious erotic element for a person to understand the human figure. You don't get it in Rembrandt, and I would say that Rembrandt understands the human figure and the human character and the whole of its dignity and everything else.

AB: Are you making a connection between Rodin and Rembrandt?

HM: No, I don't see that at all. I can see a big connection between Rodin and Michelangelo. That is a great, great influence, without doubt. He's the one artist since Michelangelo who has understood Michelangelo, but Rembrandt has an entirely different attitude, and he understands human feelings just as deeply as Michelangelo, but in a different way, more a painter, and Rodin was a sculptor. He brought sculpture out of the doldrums.

AB: I remember that Herbert Read said somewhere that Rodin reinvented a lost art. Perhaps that's a little extravagant, but it's near to the truth.

HM: Well, it is an exaggeration, because if an art is lost it means that nobody appreciates it, and nobody can again. But I can remember as a young sculptor reading a review of a mixed exhibition when the writer said he didn't intend to talk about sculpture as it was a dead art, only something to bump into or to touch your head against. Now everything has changed, and I could read off the names of a hundred sculptors in England alone. So something remarkable has happened, and to a great extent it is Rodin who is responsible.

■ First published in Rodin: Sculpture and Drawings, The Hayward Gallery, London, 1976.

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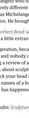

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BiggetRed2 · 21 Mar 2013 5:04 ↑ 0 ↓ 0
I have to admit, I was born too late, I love modelling and studying form but sadly this kind of sculpture is way out of fashion, it is just seen as old and fusty today, nowadays. I suspect it won't be coming back into fashion soon either, if ever. I would love to be able to do it myself, but I don't have the opportunity to do it myself and most often there is not really sculpture in the traditional sense but deconstruction, an illustration depicting an intellectual concept. Not that Rodin and Moore didn't deal in concepts, I think they were dealing with deeper human issues than most contemporary sculptors.
Report

deirdrecurdie · BiggetRed2 · 21 Mar 2013 5:04
yes someone mentioned that this art was out of fashion post- but if you want to model then go right ahead no one is stopping you ? But people can't just ease sticks into loose- go forth and model ! THEY want to then use do it but why tell others to like a pointff
I love the work of Jackson Pollock most probably ,strange to think that their lives did actually overlap by about 5 years or so ? The line of the body,bronze bridge ; post cubism ? and the body and its environment became one ? Yes Epstein coda where no one side , the
path through more Cocteau is David Smith ,Cary is nice- that sense of the body in the landscape ,Moore ,Hepworth ,Paolozzi ,Caro ,Chillida ,Ron Arad ,Martin Puryear ,Judy Rawlinson(of course) ,by by eliminating being chicken skit against being hijacked by business as usual ?
Report

BiggetRed2 · deirdrecurdie · 21 Mar 2013 6:21 ↑ 0 ↓ 0
@deirdrecurdie -
Not people can't just ease sticks you know - go forth and model !
Did I say they could?
No I didn't to your point 2?
The line to Rodin is Jackson Pollock most probably ,strange to think that their lives did actually overlap by about 5 years or so ?
Report

deirdrecurdie · BiggetRed2 · 21 Mar 2013 10:18
but read a BIG, 30 form ,because not integral to sculpture ,but it's important form – once inside the outside contour it will be fake work ? It either supported by an armature or the integral tensile strength of the material - a lump of marble , a cast of bronze etc ? A modelled surface is just somewhat deeper to the paint surface and, in the round ;
Report

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bigtip · 21 Mar 2013 10:48 ↑ 0 ↓ 0
This is a great interview, a neat exchange of erudition between people with a feeling for sculpture. I like modern and classical forms and don't see them as mutually exclusive.
Seems rather vicious to be constructing lineages between the person and that, I'd rather just enjoy each for their intrinsic merit.
Report

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