



146 Auguste Rodin

1840 – 1917 FRENCH

Jeune fille au serpent

bronze sculpture, signed and inscribed
No. 5 / © by musée Rodin 1969 / Georges
Rudier Fondateur Paris
15 ¾ x 5 ⅞ x 6 ¾ in, 40 x 14.9 x 17.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Musée Rodin, Paris
Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by Augustus
Searle Leach, Winnipeg, 1970
By descent to the present Private Collec-
tion, Winnipeg

AUGUSTE RODIN IS considered one of the leading sculptors of his age, “who gave fresh impetus to sculpture, the greatest master of the art since Michelangelo and Bernini, a virtuoso raging to bring life out of clay.”¹ Regardless, Rodin’s work was at odds with establishment tastes and often courted controversy. (He was rejected on three occasions by the École des Beaux-Arts.) In the mid-1880s, *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (1884–1889) and his *Hugo* (circa 1890) and *Balzac* (1898) monuments—the latter Rodin admitted “the sum of my whole life... my great discovery”—were part of “a trio of humiliations.”² After a not inconsiderable one-man show at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Rodin was widely acknowledged as the most important living sculptor. Constantin Brancusi wrote that the *Balzac* was “indisputably the starting point of modern sculpture.”³

His work is celebrated for several innovations: an aesthetic awareness of accident and acknowledgment of the fragment, the amalgamation of sculptural parts and path-breaking polyvalent senses, as well as the incorporation of figurative and viewer space. Rodin’s most distinguishing sculptures were individual figure or group works of a historical, literary and symbolic disposition, especially *L’Âge d’airain* (modeled 1877, collection of the Musée Rodin, Paris); *Le Penseur*, *Le Baiser* (circa 1882); *La Porte de l’Enfer* (1880–1917, collection of Kunsthau, Zürich); *Les Bourgeois*; and the *Hugo* and *Balzac* monuments. Overall, Rodin’s sculptures educate powerful bodily manifestations and psychological theatre, but they also express a deep fascination with movement.

Moreover, there is never any qualm about the eroticism in the artist’s work, in

which the carnal act seems close at hand. As Rodin proclaimed, “I have unbounded admiration for the nude. I worship it,”⁴ *Jeune fille au serpent* (circa 1885) typifying sculpture of this nature.⁵ At just over a foot tall (15 ¾ x 5 ⅞ x 6 ¾ inches), and with a loose serpentine line running right through the piece, *Jeune fille au serpent* likely has key historical significance with respect to how Rodin’s sculpture sought to “give life” (Pygmalion-style) to clay, a founding theory since antiquity. This little piece foresees how the sculptor’s work would eventually look—a far more curvaceous, flowing and expressive art form, created in an era of late-century Symbolism,⁶ as opposed to more passive ideals of human beauty in earlier neoclassicism. In fact, the marginally turned legs, knees and feet of the *Jeune fille* have a certain correlation with the awkward body position in *Le Penseur*—a physical equivalence meant to visualize the inner “anxiety, stress and tension” of the thinker—and a feature habitually overlooked in popular references to Rodin’s most famous statue.⁷

Jeune fille au serpent does in fact envisage a subject that Rodin would revisit in drawings and other sculptural pieces.⁸ The attention paid to the coiled reptile by the naked, penitent girl infers Eve beguiled by serpent and symbolizing the fall of humanity. Here the slithering snake, wrapped around arms that cover her breasts, suggests innocence in opposition to the serpent’s lusty grip. The theme was a familiar subject in *Salon* sculpture, Auguste Clésinger’s *Femme piquée par un serpent* (1847, collection of the Musée d’Orsay, Paris) depicting the lurid entanglement between a naked beauty and a treacherous viper, an erotic pose that “could easily be legitimized by a [biblical] title such as ‘Eve and the Serpent.’”⁹

Repeatedly drawn to this subject, Rodin thought “of using it as a theme for the original project for [*La Porte de l’Enfer*],” and serpents are indeed observed on the left side door in the finished piece.¹⁰ *La Porte de l’Enfer*, “a 20-year project left unfinished, is filled with [Symbolist] pessimism, anxiety and fear concerning humanity’s future. The Symbolist decadents saw human beings as fundamentally corrupt, self-seeking and petty-minded, bringing unavoidable harm and destruction upon civilisation.”¹¹ Here, naked young figures imprisoned in an Inferno reach upwards, their heads tossed back so as to express what Rodin termed “cries lost in the heavens.” Taking its theme from the first part of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the sculpture remained unfinished at Rodin’s death. Yet the soulfulness of *La Porte de l’Enfer* not only revitalized sculpture, but also made it once more a conduit for powerful individual expression. Furthermore, it was the foundation for *Le Penseur*, *Le Baiser*, and his *Eve* after the expulsion (in a design for *La Porte de l’Enfer* of 1881), a work—minus the serpent—finally completed in 1899.

As such, *Jeune fille au serpent* could similarly be viewed as part of this compelling legacy, whose impact on modern art was immeasurable. Equally important as Rodin’s sway was the impassioned answer to his supremacy amongst the modernist avant-garde. As George Hamilton Heard explains, “Perhaps the proof of his greatness is to be seen in the work of such [sculptors] as Maillol, Brancusi, Lipchitz, and others, who had to reject his method and his programme in order to assert their independence. Through the loyal opposition, so to speak, Rodin’s inexhaustible energies reach to the present.”¹²

We thank John Finlay, a historian of French history specializing in twentieth-century modern art, for contributing the above essay.

1. William Harlan Hale, *The World of Rodin, 1840–1917* (Time-Life International, Nederland NV, 1962 [1972]), 9.

2. Hale, “A Trio of Humiliations,” *World of Rodin*, 113–39.

3. Quoted in Ian Chilvers, *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 524.

4. Quoted in “Auguste Neyt, Model for ‘The Age of Bronze,’ [photo by] Gaudenzio Marconi (1842–1885),” Musée Rodin, para. 1, <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/photographies/auguste-neyt-model-age-bronze>.

5. For other casts of this work, see Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, *The Bronzes of Rodin: Catalogue of Works in the Musée Rodin* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 2007), vol. 2, 465–68, no. 5768.

6. Symbolism was a late-nineteenth-century art movement, especially in France, that advocated the expression of ideas in art. For a brief discussion of Rodin’s sculpture in the context of Symbolism see Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 348–52.

7. *Ibid.*, 349.

8. See, for instance, Rodin’s drawing of *Eve and Serpent* (Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 11935–2772) and the plaster *Torso of a Young Girl with a Serpent* (Musée Rodin, S2118), as discussed in Catherine Lampert, *Rodin: Sculpture and Drawings* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986), exhibition catalogue, nos. 6 and 19, pages 192 and 194, respectively.

9. “Social norms condemned erotic pleasure, yet allowed them to exist as long as they remained below a certain threshold of visibility and were masked by acceptable, if transparent, labels.” Facos, *Introduction*, 275.

10. Lampert, *Rodin*, 200.

11. See John Finlay, *Art History* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2020), 222. Rodin raised an objection to being labeled a Symbolist. According to the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Rodin’s art was designed “to help a time whose misfortune was that all its conflicts lay in the invisible.” His oeuvre could hence be understood in the context of the *fin de siècle* movement. For the quote, see Auguste Rodin, *L’Art*. *Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell* (Paris, 1911), 1967, 126. Cited in Michael Bishop, “Rodin in the Poetics of His Time,” in *From Rodin to Giacometti: Sculpture and Literature in France, 1880–1950*, eds. Keith Aspley, Elizabeth Cowling, and Peter Sharratt (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2000), 18.

12. Chilvers, quoted in *Dictionary*, 524.

The first bronze in this edition was cast by the Bingen foundry in Paris, ordered by Rodin in May 1886. Based on the plaster cast in their collection (Inv. MR s. 3165), Musée Rodin ordered an edition of 9 from George Rudier fondeur, produced between 1968 and 1976. George Rudier executed the sand cast for this sculpture in 1969. Some in the edition are numbered and some are not, and our sculpture is from this edition.

Included with this lot is the original certificate from the Musée Rodin dated November 20, 1969.

This work will be included in the forthcoming *Auguste Rodin catalogue critique de l’oeuvre sculpté* currently being prepared by the Comité Auguste Rodin at Galerie Brame et Lorenceau under the direction of Jérôme Le Blay, under the archive number 2020-6215B.

ESTIMATE: \$80,000 – 120,000