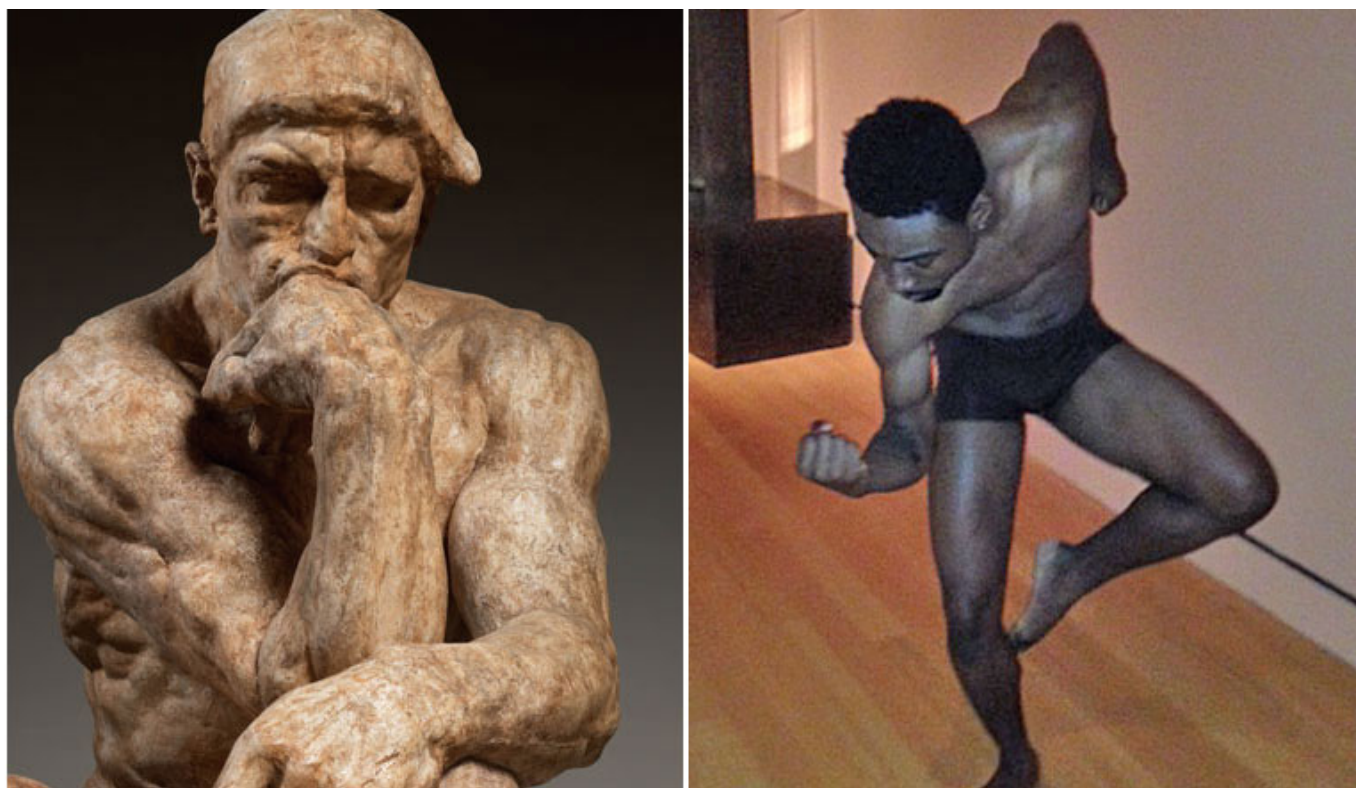


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America

Rethinking Rodin at the Peabody Essex Museum

BY **DIANE KILGORE** | MAY 13, 2016, 13:04 EDT*Printed from: <http://newbostonpost.com/2016/05/13/rethinking-rodin-at-the-peabody-essex-museum/>*

Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker" and a participating member of the BoSoma Dance Company of Peabody. (Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum)

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Rodin: Transforming Sculpture is the latest installation of acclaim at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM). According to the museum, the exhibition fundamentally alters how we understand, interpret and experience one of the world's most iconic sculptors. The collection features more than 160 finished and unfinished works by the famed French sculptor, whose career transcended academic standards and grew into legend. Through exaggeration, experimentation, and psychological exploration, the work

of Auguste Rodin used classical inspirations as a pedestal for sculpture and then radically transformed the tenets of the art form. Because of his artistic and entrepreneurial departures from convention, Rodin, who lived from 1840-1917, is now considered the progenitor of modern sculpture.

Lynnda Roscoe Hartigan, PEM's James B. and Mary Lou Hawkes deputy director, and the exhibition's coordinating curator said, "To Rodin, no sculpture was ever finished. His relentless experimentation with form, scale and composition reveal a searching, probing, problem solving mind." Within the galleries, visitors will see that many of Rodin's works are unfinished productions, yet their essence is palpable. Despite being an incomplete artistic form, the artist's passion shows through. In some pieces, the unfinished state increases the awareness of emotional fragility and tension.

Nathalie Bondil is co-curator of the installation. She also serves as director and chief curator of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, from which many of the assembled pieces have been loaned. Bondil says, "With almost 100 rare study plasters, many of them never lent in America, numerous ancient bronzes and superb marbles, this exhibition reveals Rodin's constantly evolving creative process and explores an aspect of his work that is less well known, that of his huge studio."

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The assembled collection of bronzes, marbles, plasters, and watercolors is impressive because of scope and scale. Frequently reproduced, some of the included masterpieces have a familiarity to them. As the exhibit progresses, those familiar elements are redefined.

The exhibit begins with a plaster of "The Hand of God." The poetic expressiveness of the hand is masterful in its exaggeration of anatomy, its acknowledgement of divinity, as well as an allusion to the artist's sense of self. Because Rodin saw himself as a rough-handed craftsman, imaginative expressions of hands were frequent studies for the creator. Ridiculed after two exhibitions for being overly dramatic, Rodin discontinued public display of his sculptured hands, opting instead to enjoy them in privacy.

Other iconic sculptures in the exhibit are "The Thinker" and "The Kiss." Once thought to be grotesque, "a wild orangutan, a huge brute, a bloated boxer," "The Thinker" is today one of the world's most celebrated works of art. The genius of Rodin's study reframed a classically athletic aesthetic, molding it instead into a rigid form expressing the pathos of intellect. To best understand the piece, Bondil suggests visitors of the gallery walk around the monumental sculpture, taking in its sense of emotional physicality from the furrowed brow, the nostrils, the lips, the tension of the back muscles, the clenched fists and toes. In contrast "The Kiss," a smaller piece, reveals a fluid sculpture of two loving figures. The woman's torso actively embraces the male, capturing an elegant sensual quality of anticipation. "The Kiss" brings a sense of sinuous motion to the gallery tour which is primarily dedicated to less idealized variations of the natural human condition.

Infusing a kinesthetic quality into productions, Rodin's workshop atmosphere routinely included acrobats, and dancers. Rather than use static traditionally posed models for study, the artist captured human form through motion. Physical variations of gesture were sketched by Rodin from all angles. The essence of emotion's motion were distilled into clay, then cast in plaster. Those casts were used in countless recombinations with other works. Some workshop castings were duplicated and stockpiled for years, then used as plastered "spare parts." A collector of evolving thought, irrespective of scale, variations of torsos, heads, arms and fingers were saved by the artist for composite studies to explore as new creations of psychological insight, motion, or symbolism.



Auguste Rodin (Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum)

Rodin's drive to cast off conventional sculptural protocols by frequent fragmented study of a particular body part produced variations on themes seen in other projects. His prodigious workshop with as many as fifty studio assistants included clay beaters, plaster and bronze casters, stone carvers and photographers. Unlike his contemporaries, Rodin believed the entire process of art production to be a worthy endeavor in which he was said to happily "wallow." Those sculpted wallowings are evident throughout the galleries, and most prominently displayed for comparative analysis on a photographic reproduction of "The Gates of Hell," an incomplete visualization of Dante's "Divine Comedy." From that composite of symbolic figures, (which is crowned by "The Thinker,") it's easy for gallery visitors to see how Rodin continuously updated his renderings and used variations of them in other sculptures.

Experiencing the masterpieces surrounded by intermittent, voluminous, gauzy walls amplifies an already intimate experience within

In a serendipitous post-gallery-tour chat with Nathalie Bondil, she explained Rodin's frequent use of fragmental reproductions as a reinterpretation of language. She sees the inclusion of "spare parts" in Rodin's new sculptures as comparable to using familiar words when explaining complex new thoughts in a story. The words may be familiar but juxtapositions of context change the overall statement.

Using the co-curator's analogy, visitors of the exhibition who are familiar with many of the works by Rodin may find the PEM has created, through this installation, a new vernacular in

the furniture-filled spaces of Rodin's imagined atelier.

Museum parlance. Suspended from the ceilings throughout the galleries are enormous white drapes reminiscent of those that would have been hung and constantly humidified inside Rodin's workshop. The linear and undulating contours of the drapes add another texture to the compositions of plaster, marble and bronze. Originally deployed to contain elemental dust particles from dispersing throughout the workshop, hastening deterioration of clay productions, these modern day drapes cloister the galleries. Experiencing the masterpieces surrounded by intermittent, voluminous, gauzy walls amplifies an already intimate experience within the furniture-filled spaces of Rodin's imagined atelier. The suspensions repeat the dramatic, exaggerated contours of the sculptures.

In addition to articulated graphics explaining the lucrative workshop culture Rodin created in Paris, a video of modern-day actors paying homage to the innovator's social perspectives is included in the presentation. The piece movingly depicts characters of marginalized social status standing, like sculpture, in an urban setting. As the video concludes, Rodin's sociological contemplation of humanity's selective indifference of individual suffering spans the century between his death and today. Fusing gesture with posture, and emotion, Rodin's studies of humanity defy time and place.

The subtleties of motion, the fluidity of thought are additionally, unexpectedly, encountered daily from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. as live performers create spontaneous opportunities for visitors to contemplate one's own body in space. Performers of the BoSoma Dance Company of Peabody poetically weave rhythmic body tableaux throughout the galleries, allowing guests to visualize, as Rodin did, the complexity of the human form from all angles in light and in shadow.

The juxtaposition of this contemporary presentation with iconic works, once vilified, now venerated, is a compelling cultural opportunity to contemplate. *Rodin: Transforming Sculpture* translates familiar forms into complete artistic phrases, confirming the relevance and influence of these literal and figurative masterpieces. The multi-formatted presentation of Rodin's imagination and vision will be exhibited at The Peabody Essex Museum May 14 through September 5.

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