

# **Rethinking Rodin.**

## **An Evaluative Biography.**

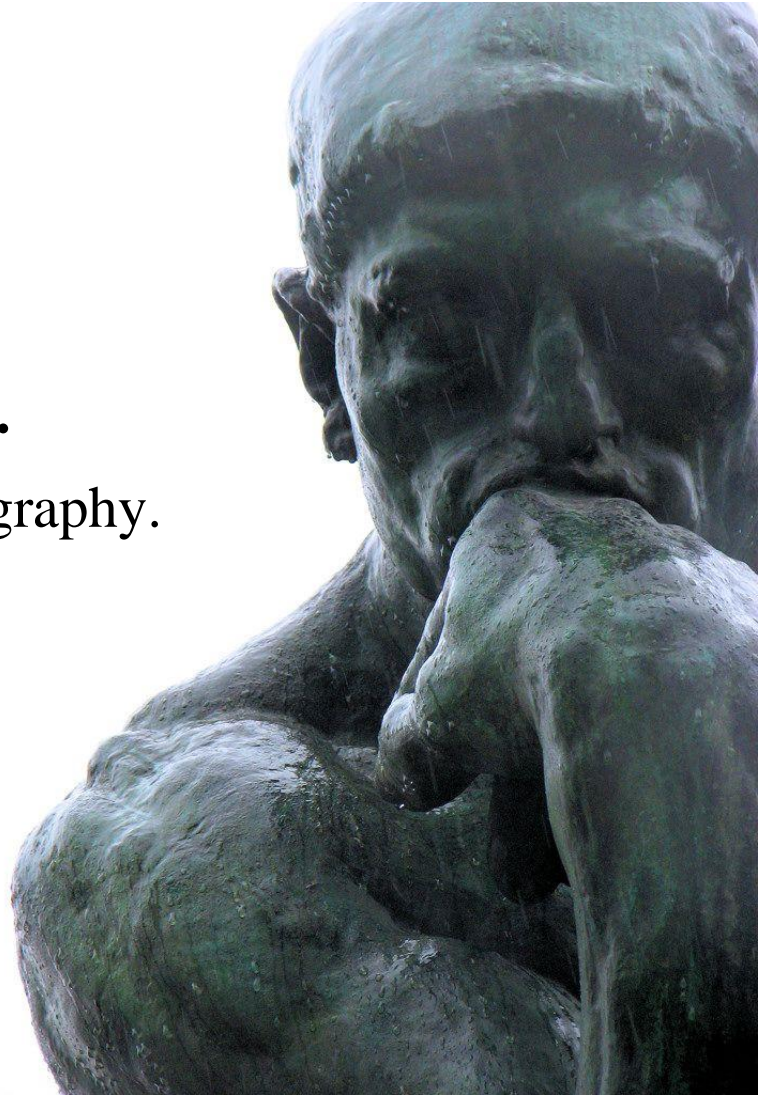


Figure 1 Auguste Rodin (1880) – *The Thinker*. Bronze cast 1904. Musée Rodin, Paris.

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# RETHINKING RODIN. AN EVALUATIVE BIOGRAPHY.

## ABSTRACT

The sculptures of Auguste Rodin have gained worldwide recognition and are amongst the most beloved artworks in our times. This worldwide adoration has added to the cult or genius surrounding the artist, which has reached deep into popular understanding of his works. This thesis will try to lift the myth of genius from Rodin's works and see how his work has been valorised over the years. The underlying idea is that it has less to do with his genius, but more with the wide dissemination of his work that Rodin has reached such fame. The main research question that has shaped this thesis, is the following: how has the reproducible nature of sculpture affected the valuation of originality and authenticity in the work of Auguste Rodin? In order to answer this question, this thesis has taken on the analytical narrative approach, which made the modelling of historical processes possible. The sources that have been used to write this analytical narrative are both primary sources and secondary literature. The thesis is divided into four chapters that each represent a moment of dissonance. It is believed that in these situations, when something new enters the market, that it becomes clear what is valued in society and what is not. For this thesis, the innovation that caused the dissonance, was always a new development in the reproduction process of Rodin's work. Through an extensive research in historical sources, this thesis made clear that the relation between reproducibility and the valuation of art is highly complex. Whereas one would expect that reproductions would easily be cast aside as commodities, this thesis has shown that in the case of Rodin, the reproductions at times even underlined the singular state of his work, building up to the cult of his artistic genius. This effect was created through clever framing and institutionalizing of his multiples. It was only at the end, when this thesis reached contemporary times, that we could localize a shift in the meaning of the Rodin reproductions. This was caused by the pure market-oriented purpose of these multiples. This practice also influenced the valuation of Rodin himself, who has changed from an artist into a popular icon.

KEYWORDS: *valuation, sculpture, originality, authenticity, reproductions*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 One Rodin Gone

In the night of January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Singer Laren Museum was unpleasantly surprised by two invaders. These two men, Reinier ter B. and Marco van der B., entered the museum by brutal force and left a trail of destruction that shocked museum director Reinier Sinaapappel the next morning when he entered the crime scene. The thieves had torn down the entire garden fence and ripped seven sculptures from their pedestals, leaving one sculpture displaced in the museum gardens on their way out. The fate of one of these six stolen bronzes worried Sinaapappel most particular. It was Auguste Rodin's (1840-1917) *Thinker* that caused the director's greatest distress, as it was considered the most invaluable piece of the museum collection (Lo Galbo, 2011). Retrieving the *Thinker* was absolute priority to both the police and Sinaapappel. Luckily for them, the thieves operated in a most amateurish fashion. In their haste, they had not only left behind one of their confiscated sculptures, but also a cut-up map with the highlighted route the thieves took from their home to the museum. This instant feeling of bliss that the discovery raised, was soon replaced by despair when they finally saw the *Thinker* again. The two men had completely molested one of the greatest works of art history, having sliced the sculpture in several places, even through its contemplating head [fig. 2]. This violent act showed a complete lack of artistic appreciation for Rodin's work, which can be explained by the motivation to steal the bronze sculpture. The thieves were inspired by the rising prices for copper at that time (€5,- per kilogram) and thought that stealing large bronzes would be more viable than going for the traditional train tracks. Bronze is an alloy consisting mainly of copper (88%), with an additive of tin (12%), which means that it would take some work for the robbers to extract pure copper from it, something that they had no experience with. The destruction of six bronze artworks (for the other works were in a heavily damaged state as well) was the outcome of their clumsy undertaking.

The question arose of what to do next. The *Thinker* was so severely damaged that restoration would prove to be a most expensive endeavour. Moreover, what would they actually get back in return? Would a completely restored *Thinker* still count as an authentic Rodin or would it have lost all its art historical value? These questions caused a heated discussion on the value of the individual work. In the end it was decided to restore the *Thinker* in full, by using a new, experimental 3D-printing technique (Beentjes, 2019). This decision displeased one of the museum commission members, Frits Scholten – head curator of sculpture at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam - to the extent that that he resigned from his post. In his view, this restored version was no longer a Rodin, but merely a piece of decoration (Lo Galbo, 2011). During the debates, Frits Scholten actually came up with a controversial suggestion: instead of restoring *this Thinker*, why not buy a *new one*? And if that proved too expensive, why not *cast* a new version? This is a solution that would never have been brought up in the case of the destruction of, say, a Rembrandt painting. But Rembrandt also did not produce in

multiples, whereas Rodin did this most enthusiastically. The Singer Laren edition of the *Thinker* alone counts 49 other, identical versions, making this individual piece hardly unique (Beentjes, 2019). Moreover, this work was cast somewhere between 1937-39, some twenty years after Rodin's passing. So why would we even consider this museum piece as an *authentic* Rodin in the first place?



Figure 2. Distorted *Thinker*, photographed by Margaretha Svensson. © Singer Laren.

## 1.2 The Value of Reproductions

### 1.2.1 Walter Benjamin's 'Aura'

This discussion on the restoration of the Singer Laren *Thinker* laid bare some quintessential questions on the nature of Rodin's sculptures and the value of reproducible artworks. For example, what is the value of an individual piece when it exists in multiples? Can we consider the multiple copies to be interchangeable? And what does the 'original' signify when the work of art is produced serially? It has become clear, that when determining the artistic value of the work of Rodin, the traditional notions of originality and authenticity have become futile. So what direction should we turn to? How can we valorise a Rodin?

When investigating the nature of reproducible art works, one cannot go around discussing the classic text by Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). This treatise discusses the devaluation of the artwork's aura through the act of reproduction. In Benjamin's writing, 'aura' has come to signify several things. The first meaning refers to the function of aura as an indicator of power within a cult (Benjamin, 1935; Hughes, 1997). Aura is the nimbus of awe that surrounds the singular artwork within a (religious) cult, and raises feelings of devotion in the spectator. In this first meaning, the artwork is psychologically distanced from the viewer and its appearance is of relatively little importance. A crucifix sculpture, for example, does not need to be aesthetically pleasing in order to perform its devotional function. The second meaning of aura relates more to how we in the present look at art. Here, it is the sense of uniqueness derived from close examination of the artwork. The surface of a work betrays the signs of manual manufacture and can be viewed as indicators of authorship and authenticity (Benjamin, 1935; Hughes, 1997). These render the unique presence of the work in the here and now, making its meaning context specific. The artwork still inspires a sense of reverence in the viewer, though no longer aimed at devotion to something outside the work of art. In this meaning, aura circulates in the cult of *artistic genius* (Benjamin, 1935).

So what changes when art is not singular, but reproducible? Benjamin argues that by the loss of its unique presence in space and time (since reproductions can be anywhere at any given time), the aura surrounding the work of art is broken down through the process of decontextualization. We should, however, not mourn this loss of aura, says Benjamin, since it opens up a world of possibilities. By transgressing the distance between art and spectator, the process of the democratisation of art is put in motion. Reproductions make art available to all, bringing even the most complex works of art inside the living room. (Hughes, 1997). We could therefore say that the reproducibility of art opens up the door to the mass consumption of art.

### 1.2.2 Questioning the Dynamics between Consumption and Valuation

This idea of mass consumption does not seem far removed from the way that we now *consume* the art of Rodin. His *Thinker* counts as one of the best-known sculptures in the world through its countless reproductions and appropriations in popular culture (Parigoris, 1997). Apparently there is something about the work that appeals to the masses. But does the origin of this appeal lie in the quality or in the quantity of the work? And what is the relation between these two concepts in understanding the charm Rodin's *Thinker* holds on us? In short, could we say that *because* of its reproducible nature, Rodin's art has become such a favourite in popular taste, making him a prime example of Walter Benjamin's theory on the democratisation of art through reproductions?

This idea will serve as a starting point to this thesis that seeks to explore the relation between the production, dissemination, consumption and valorisation of the sculptures of Auguste Rodin. The leading research question will be the following: How has the reproducible nature of sculpture affected the valuation of originality and authenticity in the work of Auguste Rodin? We will focus on

originality and authenticity, since together they are considered to make up the aura of an object, and therefore count as an distinguishing factor between *art* and *kitsch*.

The aim of this thesis is not to write an art historical reception history for Rodin, nor to give a complete overview of his productive output, but to lay bare how the unique production process of his sculptures influenced the valuation of his work. Rodin has been a popular topic of research to art historians, yet the knowledge on the connection between his use of mass production techniques and the valuation of his work seems to be lacking.

### 1.3 The Myth of Artistic Genius

Rodin was able to capture the interest of writers from a very early moment on, making the documentation of his life and work most thorough. During his life alone, several writer from different countries wrote his biographies.<sup>1</sup> The most notable of these writings came by the hand of Rainer Maria Rilke. In the year 1902, the young poet travelled to Paris to write two monographs on the - by then already famous - sculptor (Rilke, 1902; 1907). From their first encounter blossomed an intimate and artistic friendship that would last for a few years until an insoluble argument separated them in 1906. Rilke admired Rodin extensively and was devoted to him like a son (Gass, 2004). His two monographs are consequently anything but disinterested, but read like homages to the artist. Rodin's devotion to the art of sculpture has been immortalized by Rilke when he quoted the sculptor's motto: "'il faut travailler, rien que travailler<sup>2</sup>", thereby commencing the cult to his artistic genius (Gass, 2004).

Another eminent figure in the historiography of Rodin was the American art historian Albert Elsen, who devoted his professional career to the restoration of Rodin's reputation, that had come to a fall after the 1920's (Smith, 1995). Elsen also contributed frequently to museum exhibitions and catalogues, and served as director of the National Gallery's enormous exhibition "Rodin Rediscovered" in 1981 (Elsen, 1981). Elsen can be considered as the prime figure in bringing back the myth of artistic genius surrounding Rodin ever since Rilke's introduction of the theme. It is a most persistent myth, continuing to the present, as became evident during the centenary celebration of Rodin's death in 2017. Art critics could not stop flinging around the word 'genius' in their critiques on the sculptor, and it became the subject of both museum exhibitions and countless essays and books.<sup>3</sup>

The question then arises if maybe we have started to take Rodin's genius at face value. Even the art historians that help in the construction of this myth, raise the same problem in their writings, disputing that Rodin's talent is arguably more praised than it deserves to be (Janson, 1985; Le

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Cladel, J. (1903). *Auguste Rodin pris sur la vie*. Paris: Édition la Plume.; Coquiot, G. (1913) *Le Vrai Rodin*. Paris: Tallandier; Lawton. F. (1903). *The life and Work of Auguste Rodin*. London: T. Fisher. Weinberg, L. (1916). *The Art of Rodin*. New York: Boni and Liveright.

<sup>2</sup> Translation: One has to work, nothing but work.

<sup>3</sup> For example: *Rodin – Genius at Work*, exhibition at Groninger Museum (2016-17); Butler, R. *Rodin. The Shape of Genius.*; Schjeldahl, P. *The Stubborn Genius of Auguste Rodin.*; Pinet, H. *Rodin. The Hands of Genius.*;

Normand-Romain, 2014; Stephens, 2011). His genius is often brought up as the reason for his incredible popularity; but could he also simply be popular for the fact that we are overly exposed by his work through reproductions? Apparently, familiarity does not always breed contempt. The concept of genius that is so closely attached to Rodin's name, goes completely against the idea of Walter Benjamin who saw reproducible art as a way to break down the cult of artistic genius. How are we to make sense of this? A deconstruction of the myth of Rodin's genius seems to be in order.

## 1.4 Methodology

Rewriting the myth of an artist requires the recreation of the past. This thesis aims to write the first evaluative biography of Auguste Rodin. An evaluative biography describes the justifications of valuations over time and includes the “spatio-temporal unfolding of these valuations, sometimes coherent, often contradictory, some provoked by previous valuations, others relatively independent, some superficial, others in depth, some produced by laypersons, others by experts, some valorizing the work (i.e. attaching value to it), others eroding value” (Kharchenkova & Velthuis, 2015, 109-110). Writing on how value is created and how the process of valuation operates, is a complex undertaking and requires some demarcation in order to make sense of it. For what are we exactly searching for when studying the value of art?

A first step in identifying value, is by distinguishing it from price. The valuation approach, as laid out by Dekker (2014), shows that market prices do not always capture the value of art. The focus of this approach is on the intersubjective and interpersonal, thus the different kinds of relationships that exist between “individuals and cultural goods, the coordination through market processes and other social settings, and the norms, conventions, and institutions that shape these” (Dekker, 2014, p.21). This thesis will follow the lines of inquiry of the valuation approach in order to reconstruct how value has been assigned to (the works of) Auguste Rodin. We will consequently concentrate on the various interrelations that are involved in the process of valorisation and establishing value.

Beckert and Aspers' edited volume *The Worth of Goods* (2011) sheds some further light on the operationalisation of the concept of valorisation. When investigating what makes a product valuable, the authors suggest to look at the different scales of judgement. Is the good, for example, judged on aesthetic or economic criteria? These valuations according to different scales may lead to conflicts over the value judgement, since they are not translatable, and thus non-exchangeable for one another. What is valuable in one discourse, might not be in another. In order to become valuable, the good needs to achieve legitimisation, which is always historically contingent. Beckert and Aspers argue that both the producers and the intermediaries are actively involved in this process on the pursuit of value creation. Looking at how they build up their arguments for legitimisation and on what grounds this is accepted or not are interesting points of focus for this thesis.



The authors stress the importance of conventions in the process of valuation. These conventions frame judgements and allow actors to base their expectations and actions on joint knowledge. Other than the word might suggest, convention does not (necessarily) lead to stagnation in the development of new ideas and categories. Hutter and Stark (2015), in fact, argue that value is created through the deviation of established routines and conventions. The negotiation between the different regimes of worth establishes new patterns and categories in which the good is valued. Hutter and Stark label these instances of institutional change 'situations of dissonance'. These moments of dissonance can reveal what is valued in society (and what is not) when something new shows up that differs from what is already known. This idea of innovation is especially important in the arts, where breaking with conventions has become almost a prerequisite of quality. Quality namely requires individualization, the deviation from routine, in order to be recognized (Beckert & Aspers, 2011). This act of individualization meets valorisation in the judgement of intermediaries, in the case of art these are the art critics, who hold the authority on what Beckert and Aspers call praise value. Praise value is more than just a typological judgement that accompanies market valuation. It has an autonomy of its own that can, and frequently does, deviate from price value. The qualities that are praised by the critics, are not always (or often not) valued in the same degree by the market, and vice versa. The 'best' artworks (based on praise value) are thus not necessarily the ones that generate the greatest success.

The value of the judgement of the intermediary is discussed further by Wijnberg and Gemser (1999) in their work on selection systems. In their study on the valuation of the innovative qualities of the *Impressionists* painter group, they distinguished between three basic types of selection processes that operate on markets: market selection, peer selection and expert selection. With market selection, the clients are the ones who select and the artists are those who get selected. On the other hand, in the case of peer selection, the selectors and the selected are part of the same group, which means that artists value the work of other artists. Whereas in expert selection, the selectors are neither artist nor client, but have gained a position of power that enables them to make the selection based on their specific knowledge and specialized qualities. Within each type of selection process, different set of criteria and standard of quality are wielded; each having their own relative strengths and weaknesses that will affect the relative success of the innovative artists. The authors argued that innovative art will only be successful if the artists succeed in changing the selection system, and thus the ways in which value is determined. Wijnberg and Gemser proved once more that it matters who is judging.

This framework on the principles of valorisation of art is still missing one crucial theory: Kopytoff's ideas on the cultural biographies of things (1986). With the notion of the biography, Kopytoff provided a new metaphor for thinking about the distinction between objects that are like persons and those that are like things. The former are inalienable or singular items and are gifts in exchange transactions. The latter are alienable and are called commodities in exchange transactions (Fontein, 2013; Kopytoff, 1986). The cultural biography of things consequently describes the shifts in meaning of objects, with on the one hand the commodity state, and on the other the singular state. The

meaning of an object is thus not considered as an inherent quality of an object, but as a temporary *state* that is assigned to it. In his writings, Kopytoff implicitly points to the shared envisions of the right trajectory for an object, which we become aware of by deviations of this envisioned route (Fontein, 2013). By connecting the passage of Rodin's sculptures through different contexts to different valuations, I hope to find out when, how and why the shifts of meaning from commodity to singularity (and vice versa) occurred.

In order to model this historical process accurately, I will use the analytic narrative approach. This approach is an effort to combine historical and comparative research with rational choice models (Levi, 2002). It helps to grasp the meaning in moments of institutional origin and transformation by thorough knowledge on a particular case. In themselves, these conditions do not necessarily differentiate this type of approach from thorough historical research. Yet what the notion of analytics makes explicit within this research, is the focus on the key actors in a narrative: to investigate their goals, preferences and the effective rules that influence their behaviour (Levi, 2002). It is an effective way to capture change in historic processes, since it identifies the reasons for the shift from an institutional equilibrium at one point in time to another (Bates, Greif, Levi, Rosenthal & Weingast, 1998). This approach therefore fits the aims of this thesis perfectly, since it tries to capture the key moments of change in valuation, in relation to changes in production and consumption.

This thesis will, however, not simply offer a chronological overview, starting from Rodin's time up until the present with attention for all the different years under investigation. Instead, I will single out four key moments that capture the essence of change in valuation. Each of these moments represent a situation of dissonance when something new has entered the world and someone has to determine "its worth, its dangers, and its potential" (Hutter & Stark, 2015). The innovation is to be found in the deviations from the envisioned line of development in the narrative of Rodin caused by the reproducibility of his work. The valuation that I will be researching here, thus indicates a moment of institutional change. Writing in moments of dissonance therefore enables me to actually model the historical process, instead of merely describing the past.

When studying what qualities are praised in art, Dekker (2014) point to the challenge that awaits the researcher, since using the valuation approach requires both a thorough understanding of the field of the arts and the ability to work within the field of analytical social science. I will gladly accept this challenge while I strive to explore how my art historical background can enrich the theories of valuation in the domain of cultural economics.

## 1.5 Moments of Valuation

This thesis is structured into four chapters, each exploring a different moment in the valuation history of Rodin. All key moments are meticulously chosen for the radical change they represent both within the world of the arts and the world of commerce at that time. Each of the chapters will deal with the

essential tensions between the valuation in artistic and in economic terms. To stretch this idea even further, we will see that this also indicates an inherent tension between exclusivity and accessibility, since these concepts allude to different groups who make the value judgements.

The first chapter will start in the year 1900, which marked a turning point in the valuation of the sculptor. It was the year when he set up a solo-exhibition to a large, international audience and for the first (and last) time showed his unfinished masterpiece *The Gates of Hell*. The buzz that had created around the work enabled the artist to set up a most efficient production process that was based on the reproducing of fragmentary pieces and re-use them in new creations. This resulted in the largest productive output of a sculptor from that time. We will discuss how this affected the valuation of his work and what imbalances rose from this practice.

In the second chapter we will see what happened with the valuation of Rodin after his death in 1917. It was the year that saw the establishment of the Musée Rodin and ensured the preservation of his oeuvre as national heritage to future generations. At the same time, the Musée Rodin also greatly impacted the accessibility of his sculptures when the museum decided to make new casts from the original models that Rodin had created and sell these as original artworks to various museums abroad. What changed in the valuation of Rodin when his sculptures became accessible to worldwide audiences? And why did no one object to this business of posthumous creation by the Musée Rodin? The concepts of originality and authenticity will be further challenged in this chapter on the posthumous casts.

We will skip a few decades and land in the 1980's when The National Gallery of Art opens the *Rodin Rediscovered* exhibition. They display a very special work by the artist, one that has never been seen before. It is a lost-wax bronze cast of the *Gates of Hell*. This cast is a late interpretation of how the artist would have wanted this work to become, since he never finished them and destroyed the plaster cast after the exhibition in 1900. How did the American scholars from the 1980's get the authority to create a new Rodin? And why have we come to value this specific edition as the most authentic work of the artist that is considered the quintessential piece to his oeuvre? We will see that the concept of *intention* has played a big role in all of this.

The fourth and final chapter will look at Rodin in contemporary setting. The year 2017 celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the artist and came with worldwide exhibitions. We will discuss two of these exhibitions: the one at the Musée Rodin and the official centrepiece of the centennial tribute at the Grand Palais, Paris. These museums tried to show a new side to the artist that by this time is already commonly known by the larger audiences. Will these new perspectives also render renewed artistic valuations? The idea of new perspectives is not wielded by the marketing department that is responsible for the sales of Rodin souvenirs. The centenary came with a special edition souvenir: original reproductions from his work. How is it possible that reproductions get labelled as 'original'? And how do these reproductions that are -in theory- accessible to all affect the

way that we value and perceive the artist and his works? This chapter will demonstrate what changes when art moves into the realms of popular culture.

When all the four moments of dissonance are thoroughly explored and sufficiently discussed, a conclusion will bind all things together. We will see what we have actually learned from this research on the theories of valuation of art, and I will provide an answer to the original research question that shaped this thesis on the interrelation between reproducibility and valuation of art.

## 2. The Gates to Success

We are going to start off with the revealing of what would later become known as the ultimate artistic achievement of Rodin: *The Gates of Hell*. For such a presumed masterpiece, it is remarkable that Rodin could not find an official exhibition space to display his work. In the year 1900, Rodin had already achieved great artistic acclaim and was counted amongst the wealthiest artists of his day, but his work had not yet been recognized by the official institutions of that time. We will delve deeper into the various worlds of valuation and their intersubjectiveness, where we will see how sometimes acclaim in one circle can lead to a decline of value in another. We will focus on two issues that have played an important role in the valuation of Rodin: his introduction of a new aesthetic and his efficient use of existing production processes. These issues are in tension with one another since the first is in great support of the traditional concept of aura, as laid out by Benjamin, while the latter detracts from that. How are we supposed to understand their interconnectedness?

### 2.1 The Power of Exposure

#### 2.1.1 From Excluded to Exclusive

One of the visitors to the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 in Paris was struck by how one artist alone had received the greatest official recognition by rendering him his private space of display, whereas each big nation was only represented by a comparative much smaller space of their own (Stephens, 2011). The artist in question was Auguste Rodin and the space was the *Pavillon Rodin* at the Place de l'Alma, right next to the entrance of the Universal Exhibition. The visitor was, however, slightly mistaken, since Rodin had not actually received the greatest official recognition, as the pavilion did not belong to the Universal Exhibition, but was a separate installation that was not initiated by the French State. The idea, in fact, was Rodin's own, as were all the expenses for it. The visitor should not be blamed for the misunderstanding, since sources from the time reveal that the general assumption was that this Rodin Pavilion was indeed erected as a monument to the artist as part of the official program of the Great Exhibition (Janson, 1985; Stephens, 2011). The visitor was Anthony Ludovici, who would later become a famous philosopher and social critic, but, after his visit to the pavilion, first applied to the function of secretary to Rodin, and was granted the position for a few months (Corbett, 2016). Apparently the exhibition held such great appeal that it inspired a young and intelligent man to devote his time to the sculptor. So what was it that made this exposition so special?

One of the first things that make it so interesting, is the time and place that Rodin decided upon to erect his own pavilion. We should not think of this as a mere coincidence, but as a clear attempt by the artist to share in the formal context of the Universal Exhibition and as a means to self-promotion. Erecting his own pavilion would have cost him greatly, so he would only have done it if he thought that the returns would be even greater. This great solo-exhibition not only gave Rodin an air of

a national figure worthy of state sponsorship, but also put in him direct contact with potential (international) clients. That Rodin realised a great commercial opportunity in this exhibition is not only shown in the documents that testify to the immediate sales on location, with 150 out of 160 pieces sold (Le Normand-Romain, 2014), but also through the high price he charged for the admission tickets (Stephens, 2011). These costly tickets furthermore gave the exhibition an exclusive allure. This solo-exhibition thus provided Rodin both with immediate income and ensured him of future commissions, also from abroad.

The exhibition showed the vast majority of the artist's oeuvre with over 160 works present. It was set up as a retrospective to the sculptor, indicating that the artist had already achieved so much in life, and with the promise of even more to come. The phenomenon of the retrospective show as a marketing tool has been thoroughly researched by Jensen (1994) in his study on the marketing of modernist art. He demonstrated that when the retrospective shows took shape in the early nineteenth century, they were initially met with great resistance. These exhibitions could never exist without the investment by commercial galleries and this commercial purpose of the show was difficult to hide. Within the artistic circles, the elevation of the individual for the purpose of making sales was looked upon with suspicion, which actually resulted in the avoidance of the retrospective show by the *people who mattered* (Jensen, 1994). This initial rejection was overcome when the retrospective moved into a more artistic environment, being organized in conjunction with special events, such as the annual Salon exhibition or the Universal Exposition. This artistic context gave immediate legitimation for the one-man shows, though they were still more easily accepted for already deceased artists. The living artist would always be exhaustively judged if he (for it was always a 'he') was worthy of such attention. Jensen further emphasizes that the retrospective hardly ever made the career of an artist, since he would have to command a prior established reputation within a (small) circle of critics and patrons in order to be considered for the occasion (Jensen, 1994). The retrospective would rather confirm this reputation and now made it visible to a large public, thereby expanding the circles that valorise the work of the artist.

Now we have learned the workings and meaning of the retrospective show and the role it played in the valuation of artists, let's have a look at how the Rodin Pavilion was set up. We could say that it rested on the fundamentals of exclusion rather than inclusion, since it focused on the art of the sculptor within his own artistic development, taking it out of its context. It showed the historical process that Rodin had made as an artist, by which the public could judge if they preferred an 'early' Rodin to a 'later' Rodin. Ideally, this would not be the case since the show was meant to show his greatest achievements and upward development. The work that was presented as the (preliminary) end point of Rodin's development, in which his artistic qualities thus supposedly culminated, was ironically also the work that kickstarted Rodin's career twenty years earlier: it was his *Gates of Hell* [fig. 3].



Figure 3. Auguste Rodin (1880-1900) – *The Gates of Hell*. Plaster cast from 1918. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

### 2.1.2 The Florentine Inspiration

*The Gates of Hell* were meant to become the greatest public instalment by Rodin, who in life received rather few state commissions, but the doors suffered the fate of never being installed. Rodin started work on the *Gates* at the beginning of his career in 1880, when he was approached by the French government to design a sculptural portal for a newly proposed Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris. To give such a commission to a middle-aged artist (for Rodin already counted forty years by that time) with no previous experience on such a project, and whose limited exposure had been overshadowed by

talk of scandal<sup>4</sup>, was an act not only of great confidence but also of great daring. This act has in later literature been explained by a more liberal climate in government that benefited Rodin, whereas under the previous, conservative regime he had been ignored (Elsen, 1981, Le Normand-Romain, 2014).

Rodin was given remarkable freedom in the conception and execution of the design. He was never given measurements for his doors nor assigned an architect with whom to work and who could have designed the frame and its mouldings. No delivery date was set. Moreover, Rodin would later explain that the government left the choice of subject completely to him (Elsen, 1981). He chose his theme in dialogue with a Renaissance master from Florence, the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti who designed his gilded bronze doors for the Baptistery in the fifteenth century, depicting *The Gates of Paradise*. Rodin decided to create its counterpart with *The Gates of Hell*. For the narrative element he also found his inspiration in Florentine sources, using Dante's *Inferno*. *The Gates* were to depict the suffering of human kind, a theme most captivating to Rodin. He had already been reading Dante's work since the appearance of the French translation in 1875 and made drawings after its stories, where he was especially grasped by the characters' self-inflicted tragedy and aggression against the human body (Elsen, 1981).

After receiving the initial acceptance to his choice of subject, Rodin continued further on intuition. Research of his drawings and *maquettes*<sup>5</sup> has shown that Rodin tried to incorporate both Christian and pagan stories to his theme. The final known version of *The Gates* indeed embodied influences of several new sources, including the contemporary poet Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (Elsen 1981, Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). For twenty years, the doors developed into different shapes, with Rodin working and re-working over two hundred figures. Despite the great effort put into their creation, they never reached completion. The plans for the new museum were cancelled and thus the need for the bronze doors was nulled. Yet this did not stop Rodin from turning *The Gates* into his greatest commercial success.

### 2.1.3 From Unity to Fragment

When Rodin exposed his *Gates* in 1900, they were still not finished, and so Rodin displayed them in an incomplete state. They were intended to be cast in bronze, but Rodin had only the preliminary model ready in plaster. It has often been suggested, based on his own writings and reworkings, that Rodin was never fully pleased with the end result (Le Normand-Romain, 2014). This idea is supported by the fact that on the day of the grand opening of the pavilion, Rodin decided against assembling the

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<sup>4</sup> The first public exhibition of Rodin's work in the official Salons was his life size figure *The Age of Bronze* in 1876. The sculpture made quite an impression due to its high degree of realism, which caused critics to doubt if Rodin had maybe cast the figure from life, instead of modelling the sculpture with his own hands. This caused quite a public scandal and Rodin had to defend his reputation by showing photographs of the work in progress as evidence to his truthful handling of the sculpture.

<sup>5</sup> The maquette is a scale preliminary model or rough draft of an unfinished work; the sculptural equivalent to the painter's sketch.



plaster doors (since they consisted of separated elements), but instead decided to exhibit the architectural frame with only a small amount of sculptural elements attached to it (Elsen, 1981; Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003; Le Normand-Romain, 2014). The vast majority of the sculptures that were intended for the structure were exhibited as loose pieces that proved to be of high individual quality and Rodin probably realised that these were more marketable than the monumental and context-specific doors. From the *Gates*, Rodin eventually distilled forty individual pieces, of which some were to become the most well-known pieces of the artist, such as *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*. But in order to make these individual pieces more merchantable, Rodin had to strip them from their original context and meaning in order to fit multiple purposes. We will discuss this process of generalization for *The Thinker* and how Rodin provided the conditions for multiple readings and meanings to the same work. This would render him the possibility to sell the same piece for different contexts and purposes.

## 2.2 The Many Lives of the Thinker

*The Thinker* was originally designed to overlook the scene of human suffering unfolding and was the one sculpture that stood out the most in the original design. Crowning the doors at the top middle, he was conceived as a generalized image of Dante. Once detached, Dante was turned into *The Poet-Thinker*. The first bronze cast of this sculpture dates from 1884 and still bears the signs of its Florentine origin. This *Poet-Thinker* is now called the *Ionides-Thinker*, after its commissioner (Blanchetière & Thurrowgood, 2014). This first cast left Rodin in doubt, since he did not know how to recognizably depict a generalized Dante (since his facial features differentiate from the Dante we know from paintings) when removed from its original context. In the end, he decorated the figure with a little Florentine cap, as a reference to Dante's roots (Blanchetière & Thurrowgood, 2014). This cap has solely been placed on the *Ionides-Thinker*, because soon after its casting, Rodin realized that the physical qualities of the figure could serve more than the purpose of merely portraying the Italian poet. The cap was once again removed, opening the door to a universal interpretation of the work, marking the birth of *The Thinker*. But what kind of thinker was he to be?

His meaning was soon established when *The Thinker* got its first position as a public monument. In 1906, a public subscription acquired an enlarged (colossal) version of the work for the state to place it outdoors in Paris. It was inaugurated in front of the Pantheon, the resting place of so many great thinkers (now relocated to the garden of Musée Rodin). The inauguration took place at a time of social and economic strife in France and Rodin's thinker was at risk of becoming an idle monument to great men from the past. The artist jumped to the statue's defence, declaring that *The Thinker* was, in fact, a worker, just like them, turning the statue into a social symbol and a *Monument to Labor* (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). The thoughts of *The Thinker* are directed at "the social troubles, about how totally different is the mentality of the workers and the spirit of the unemployed of

this country” (Rodin, 1906, as cited in Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). Rodin read the situation perfectly and gave a new, urgent meaning to the work that he had created twenty five years before.

This great monument to men also became a monument to Rodin himself, an idea he consciously played with in photography by capturing himself in a similar pose in front of the statue. (Stephens, 2011). This idea was further implemented after the death of the artist, when a monumental *Thinker* was placed on top of his grave. The monumentally sized version, of which twenty-one examples were made during his life, started to appear in the early twentieth century on university campuses and in front of museums, making it susceptible to varied interpretations. The original version was cast in a series of fifty casts during his life, and an uncountable amount of small-sized versions, causing a wide dispersal of the work. It has often been acknowledged that the omnipresence of *The Thinker* has contributed to making it the most famous modern sculpture in the world, arguably even more famous than it deserves to be (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003; Janson, 1985; Le Normand-Romain, 2014; Stephens, 2011).

The example of *The Thinker* not only shows how this work was able to reach such great fame, but also gives us an insight into the production process of Rodin. We have seen that *The Gates of Hell* marked a turning point in this process of artistic creation. He started to isolate elements from one sculptural installation and sold them as individual works. This efficiency in creating merchantable objects was extended further by the several casts that he sold from the same figure. This was not something new to the art of bronze sculpture, which in essence had always been reproducible. Yet the scale in which Rodin operated, had never been seen before. We can assume that this practice increased his market value; but how did this affect his artistic valuation?

## 2.3 The Production of Art

### 2.3.1 From Studio to Factory

Rodin has become one of the artists with the largest productive outputs worldwide, perhaps challenged only by Pablo Picasso. The difference with the Spanish artist, is that most of these works by Rodin consisted of multiple editions of the same work, rather than individually distinct pieces. Indeed, by the end of his life Rodin acknowledged that he had no clue how many versions of his work were out there in the world (Corbett, 2016). It is estimated that, during Rodin’s lifetime, there were probably around fifteen hundred pieces (Beentjes, 2019). Such a large productive output required the arrangement of an advanced and efficient studio.

The studio of Rodin was arranged in such a way that he only had to concern himself with the first steps in the creative process (Beale, 1975). He started his work with a wet clay model, which he is known to have reworked many times over (Le Normand-Romain, 2014). This soft clay model would then be converted into a more durable medium to ensure long term preservation of the model and enable reproduction. This was usually done by a student making a plaster mould which was

subsequently used to make a plaster model (usually 6-12 at a time) (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). It is, however, important to keep in mind that this conversion of the clay model always came with some loss of surface detail, or other minor imperfections (Beentjes, 2019). After the creation of the plaster model, a sturdy sand-mould had to be produced to hold the bronze. The fabrication of these sand cores was a complex process, which was completely in the hands of the foundries employed by Rodin. After the pouring and drying of the bronze, the patination process started, which in previous generations was often done by the artist him/herself, but which Rodin departed from (Beentjes, 2019). He left that task completely to the foundry, giving them the final hand in the realization of the artwork. These finished sculptures were then later send to their commissioners, without Rodin giving them a final glance or checking (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). If a new size of the work was commissioned, the resizing of the model was done by the help of the Achille Collas machine, invented in the early nineteenth century, which made it possible for Rodin to have reductions made of his most popular works without investing valuable time (Beale, 1975).

What we can conclude from this reconstruction of his production method, is that the sculptural works that the customers acquired, had received little manual attention from the sculptor. Indeed, the way that Rodin had set up his studio is comparable to a factory with an almost industrial ethos. So why have the products that rolled out of this factory not been valued as commodities? By all means, that verdict would seem justified as the reproductions exploit the original conception of the artwork for financial gain. At the same time, we can see that it is very difficult to point to an *original* work in this process. Would we then have to value the wet clay model as the singular artwork? Nevertheless, even though this model had received the touch of the artist, in its conception it was never meant to stay in clay form but grow out into either a bronze or marble shape.

### 2.3.2 A New Hierarchy for the Arts & Crafts

In Rodin's work ethos we can see a clear separation between artistic conception and production. With this division, he followed a path already set in motion in the eighteenth century when the concept of Art was introduced to the Western world (Shiner, 2001). Where the ancient Greeks still lacked a word that could distinguish art from craft, the Renaissance thinkers started to contemplate on the changing status of the artist. Nevertheless, it would take two more centuries for the demarcation to reach completion. And it was only in the nineteenth century that this separation between art and craft induced a hierarchy between them (Shiner, 2001). Art was placed above craft in this new hierarchy, with the new ideal of the artist as the genius of creative imagination on the rise. The previously esteemed craftsman was now reduced to the image of a manual worker, lacking any form of genius. The nineteenth century was also the time that witnessed the ascend of *l'art pour l'art*, that favoured art as a realm of autonomous works solely intended for the aesthetic experience. This autonomy could not be found in the crafts that always serve another purpose outside of the aesthetic.

In this tension between the arts and crafts, Rodin held an interesting position since he started off his career as a craftsman. Having been refused admission three times as a young adult at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Rodin received his education at the Petite École, considered a lesser counterpart of the official academy and intended primarily for the training of craftsmen (Janson, 1985). The first decade and a half of his working life he spent as a craftsman, and we can see that this was a valuable experience to him in setting up his own workshop. The accusation that the craftsman of the nineteenth century had to endure, was that he was not able to conceive of new ideas, but produced the same shapes over and over again (Shiner, 2001). In his creative process, Rodin set all in for the artistic conception, giving shape to new ideas. At the same time, we can see that his workshop was following the lines of craftsmanship, where the same figures were endlessly reproduced. It was thus through the mindset of the craftsman that Rodin was able to achieve his commercial success.

The fact that Rodin turned his art into a commercial enterprise resulted in critique from within artistic circles (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003; Janson, 1985). Even though the ideal of the artist rested on his conceptions, this did not mean that art had already achieved a conceptual state. Conceptual art would only take off after Rodin's death in 1917, when Marcel Duchamp exhibited his *Fountain*, but that is another myth of genius that we will not delve into for this thesis. What is of importance here, is that in the nineteenth century, the artistic conception was still supposed to be visible in the *touch* of the artist (Dunstan, 2014). Some art critics of the time pointed out that the touch of Rodin was completely absent from his work given the fact that the final works were produced by his assistants (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003; Janson, 1985). Their critique, however, fell on deaf ears since Rodin was able to deceive the public with the introduction of his new trademark: the aesthetic of the *non-finito*.

## 2.4 The Authentic Aesthetic

Rodin is often falsely credited for inventing the aesthetic of the *non-finito*, but the name alone should already give away that this aesthetic was not conceived off in France. *Non-finito* is Italian for “not finished”, and it became an officious ideal in the marble sculpture of Florentine Renaissance. Especially the work of Michelangelo has been praised for its *non-finito* rendering, which in his case was not a voluntarily choice, but always the result of his inability to finish the work on time (Hughes, 1997). The greatness of Michelangelo was a popular subject in artistic treatises of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>, and it was believed that the endless creativity of Michelangelo was expressed through the various commission he took up at the same time. The fact that he was not able to complete his commissions actually spoke to the creative genius of the sculptor since he was already busy with the invention of new ideas for his next, future artwork (Hughes, 1997). Michelangelo worked mostly in

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most influential treatises on the topic was *The Renaissance* by Walter Pater from 1873 (Hughes, 1997).

the material of marble, so when his work remained unfinished, it meant that the block out of which the figure arose was still visible, as well as the lines from the chisel that would have been polished out if the work was in a finished state. These working lines were conceived off in the nineteenth century as the *touch* of the artist, and became an important tool to follow the working process of the sculptor, and come closer to the intention and interior mind of the artistic genius (Dunstan, 2014). The touch thus became the ultimate characteristic to judge a sculpture's authenticity.

For the bronzes of Rodin, the touch would have to be an artificial construction, since all the steps in production would fade out his original handling of the material. As for his marbles (for Rodin also produced some work in marble), the touch was even more deceptive. Rodin was known as a great modeller, yet his carving skills were failing, which caused his marble sculptures to also be produced and reproduced by his assistants (Parigoris, 1997). So how was he then to make his touch visible? Rodin modelled chisel lines in his wet clay models, giving it the appearance of an unfinished state. Moreover, he modelled blocks around his figures that would give the illusion as if the sculptures appeared out of the stone material. A prime example to this procedure is his beloved *The Kiss* [fig.4] that shows all the tracings of the *non-finito* aesthetic.



Figure 4 . Auguste Rodin (1882) – *The Kiss*. Marble carving of 1898. Musée Rodin, Paris.

All the works by Rodin were, however, very much *finito*. Working in this aesthetic – that he had not invented but appropriated in a time when it was highly fashionable in the artistic debate – rendered him the opportunity to give his reproductions a sensation of authenticity and share in the cult of genius surrounding Michelangelo. In his monograph on the sculptor, Rilke even recalls a moment when Rodin at the final moment decides to push his thumb in a clay model before his assistants can continue the production process (Gass, 2004). This fingerprint would give way to the literal expression of touch by the artist in his work. Rodin seemed very much aware of how the idea of the *non-finito* would provide his reproducible work an imprint of authenticity. It actually enabled him to construct a false sense of aura around his work.

## 2.5 Worlds of Valuation

The valuation of Rodin's work is a testimony to the multifaceted world of art. His new aesthetic brought him great acclaim within the *right* artistic climate of the time. This artistic climate consisted of the taste makers, or the so-called *juste milieu* that comprised of innovative artists, such as the Impressionist painter group (Jensen, 1996). Yet while his art was valorised within progressive circles, his aesthetic was considered too radical for the official artistic institutions (Janson, 1985). This made it difficult to exhibit and sell his work at the Salons. The Salon was the official annual art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and was considered a crucial institution for an artist to achieve success. Starting in 1667 by royal decree, the Salon held great esteem in artistic circles. It was more than just a space of exhibition, but also served as a great societal event in Paris where all the important people from the field gathered for the period of a few weeks and new ideas were exchanged (Crow, 1987). These new ideas, however, did not develop that quickly as the Salon and the Académie remained traditional institutions where the classical ideal prevailed for a long period of time. This classical ideal was still very persistent when Rodin tried to set up his career.

The modern times provided Rodin with another way to reach an audience: through the spread of photographic reproductions of his sculptures in international artistic journals (Stephens, 2011). These journals were initiated at a time when the shift in selection system started to occur: from the official Academy, the independent art critic emerged as a new authority on the judgement of artistic quality (Wijnberg & Gemser, 1999). Rodin benefitted greatly from this shift to the experts, since they favoured innovation over tradition. The art experts covered the works of the sculptor enthusiastically, causing his fame to travel abroad (Stephens, 2011). As we have seen with the first commission for *The Thinker*, Rodin found his international patrons through these novel art journals. His high market value thus resulted from his artistic valuation that was based on his new aesthetic.

The danger is, that when your claim to fame rests on your innovative aesthetic, the innovation of others can catch up with you. This is exactly what happened to Rodin. How he lost touch with the modern developments around him is expressed in his involvement with the establishment of the Salon

d'Automne in 1903. This alternative salon was initiated to help the careers of young and progressive artists who, like Rodin, were excluded from official state recognition (Jensen, 1996). The support of Rodin and artists like Pierre-August Renoir were supposed to legitimize this new annual exhibition, but instead they damaged the forward outlook of the program. In only a few years' time, a new *juste milieu* had taken shape, that considered the style of Rodin and his compatriots to be outdated. The Salon d'Automne thus might not have realised its artistic goals, it did turn out to be a great commercial success. Buyers proved to be slow to adapt to the new tastes of the *avant-garde* and continued to buy the works of the former *juste milieu*, which included Rodin. The commercial success in the end caused further artistic devaluation of this alternative salon, which was accused of only serving the market oriented ambitions of the commercial dealers and did very little for the development of the arts (Jensen, 1996). This tension between artistic and commercial success eventually rubbed off on Rodin as well. After 1900, Rodin might have lost his valorisation in the new artistic climate, his market performance continued to rise since he was still very much in favour with his American patrons (Corbett, 2016; Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003).

The final stage of the valuation process consisted of the valorisation by the official authorities, the Académie des Beaux-Arts and consequently the French State. Having received rather few public commissions during life, Rodin was finally able to be officially recognized as an important artist to the French state in 1917, when they agreed to erect a museum to the artist. The valorisation of his art thus shifted from the *juste milieu* to the traditional institutions. This recognition in form of a museum is far greater than any public commission ever could be, since it would mean that his art and persona would be preserved for future generations.

### 3. Musée Rodin: Protector and Producer of Heritage

In this chapter, we will focus on the commodification process of Rodin's sculptures set in motion by the legal heirs of his oeuvre: the *Musée Rodin*. The museum's strategy of survival in the economic turbulent times of the 1920's rested on the sales of freshly cast (i.e. posthumous) reproductions of his sculptures. These reproduction are still known today as *original* Rodins, which challenges all our conceptions of originality and authenticity. The role of the museum made a shift from protector to producer of Rodin's oeuvre. How does this affect the meaning and value we ascribe to his work? In order to find this out, we will delve deeper into a specific case study: the valuation of Rodin's work in Japan in the 1920's. The increased productive output of Rodin's work caused a wide dispersal of his sculptures to various parts in the world. We will see that in the case of Japan, the value of his work changed the moment that the sculptures arrived in the country and became accessible to larger audiences. This case will make explicit how much market and artistic valuation can differ from one another.

#### 3.1 The Added Value of the Museum

##### 3.1.1 The Making of a Monument

At the first board meeting of the Musée Rodin in March 1919, director Léonce Bénédite sought to formalise a practice that would ensure a steady source of income to the museum: the selling of bronze casts of Rodin's sculptures (Challis, 2018). This would not be a case of deaccessioning, since the museum collection would remain intact. What Bénédite proposed, instead, was to produce new sculptures and sell them as original works assigned to Rodin. How can we understand this practice if not as an instance of fraud and commercial exploitation of a cultural good? Before we can answer these questions, we should first turn our attention to the direct history that triggered this unprecedented shift to the museum as producer. Only then can we make claims on the impact of this museum practice on the valorisation of Rodin.

The idea for a Musée Rodin was conceived in the year 1907 by the artist himself. At the time, Rodin rented his studio in Paris at the Hôtel Biron [fig. 5], an eighteenth-century town palace that was listed by the state for demolition due to deferred maintenance. In order to stop the destruction of his favoured studio, Rodin tried to strike a deal with the government. He proposed that, on his passing, the artist would leave the state all of his own work, including letters, drawings, paintings and sculptures, as well as the copyrights pertaining to them (Stephens, 2011). In return, the French State would erect a museum for the artist in his beloved Hôtel Biron, which would put a halt to its demolition. During life, Rodin was thus actively engaged in his own institutionalisation and ensured his commemoration. His donation was gladly accepted (after a careful consideration of ten years) and considered a grand gift to the nation, as we can read in the official statement of the *Beaux-Arts*.



Le comité de la Société nationale des beaux-arts adresse à l'illustre président de la section de sculpture, Auguste Rodin, ses plus chaleureuses félicitations pour le don splendide qu'il fait à la France, de la totalité de son œuvre et de ses collections. Il saisit cette occasion pour exprimer, une fois de plus, l'admiration qu'il professe pour le grand artiste qui a contribué si glorieusement au succès des expositions de la Société nationale. – Tous ses confrères du comité estiment que les pouvoirs publics rendront un magnifique et juste hommage à l'art français en acceptant le don du grand sculpteur <sup>7</sup>(October 19, 1917, as cited in Stephens, 2011, p. 280).

By agreeing to his proposal, the French State acknowledged the quality of Rodin's work and legitimised his cultural value. They embraced Rodin not just as an individual artist, but made him into a national symbol by alluding to the future museum as a 'just tribute to French art'. So how did the museum add further value to the artist's oeuvre?



Figure 5. Garden view of the Musée Rodin, Paris.

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<sup>7</sup> Translation: The committee of the National Society of Fine Arts addresses the illustrious president of the sculpture section, Auguste Rodin, its warmest congratulations on the splendid gift he makes to France, of all of his work and its collections. He takes this opportunity to express once again his admiration for the great artist who has contributed so gloriously to the success of the National Society exhibitions. - All his colleagues on the committee believe that the public authorities will pay a magnificent and just tribute to French art by accepting the gift of the great sculptor.

We have to see this in light of the role and function of a museum. In their research on selection systems and valorisation, Wijnberg & Gemser (1999) emphasised the growing importance of the museum institute in the determination of value. The art museum came to a rise in the eighteenth century, where it had grown out of private collections now made public. The museum primarily served as a repository for the works of artists from the past and as an institute for the training of young artists. During the nineteenth century, the museum exhibition practices changed as they started to play a more active role in the display of contemporary artists. This practice had a tremendous effect on the careers of these artists, since the museum signalled that these art works were of such high quality that they had to be preserved for future generations. In their exhibitions, museums had (and have) an important role in influencing the way that the audiences perceive art. In this way, museums became prominent intermediaries in the valorisation of contemporary arts and artists.

Preziosi & Ferago (2019) researched the European concept of the museum and its traditional function, which can be summarised as the documenting and monumentalising of identity, history and heritage. There is a certain tension in the role of both documenting and monumentalising, as the first refers to the past as it was, while the latter implies the glorification of the past, thereby adding (subjective) meaning to it. How did this tension unfold at the Musée Rodin? It is not my intention here to reconstruct the framing of the artist by the museum, but instead to decipher how the museum gave shape to the cultural biography of the sculptures, as denoted by Kopytoff (1986): the shifting between singular - and commodity state.

After the death of Auguste Rodin on November 17, 1917, the French State was obliged to renovate the Hôtel Biron and turn it into a museum solely devoted to the sculptor. As mentioned before, Rodin not only bequeathed his sculptural works, but also all the letters he had received, and drafts of those he sent. He even left behind a collection of all the articles that mentioned his name, which he carefully assembled during life (Stephens, 2011). This enabled the assigned curators to not only display his work as it was delivered to them, but to reconstruct the life, working process and reception history of the artist. We could therefore say that Rodin shaped the conditions for the staging of his own narrative. Jensen (1996) argued that the museums were important marketing tools for the modern artists of the nineteenth century, as these institutions historicised their art. By displaying their art in the context of art from the past, these artists were institutionalised in the cultural canon and historically legitimised. This was different for Rodin, as the Musée Rodin solely displayed his work, not placing it in dialogue with art from different ages. The sculptor was not exhibited as part of a larger story, but he, actually, *was* the story of Musée Rodin. So when the French State agreed to establish this museum, they in fact erected a shrine to the artist, and thereby turning him into a celebrated national figure worthy of such a monument of public display. The Musée Rodin has consequently been a crucial agent in writing the cultural biography of Rodin's oeuvre, by underlining the singular state of the sculptural objects and classifying them as art.

### 3.1.2 The Heritage Factory

This chapter, however, started with a very different story, where the Musée Rodin discovered the exchange value of the sculptures. From the beginning, the museum was struggling to make ends meet. They opened their doors in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, when France had increased its money supply to fund the war effort. This resulted in a significant devaluation of its currency: between the years 1919-1926 the franc lost eighty percent of its value. (Challis, 2018). The museum could therefore not depend on any large national funding, and had to find a new strategy to sustain itself. What they decided to do, was very different from the ‘normal’ path that we imagine for museums and their collections, thereby causing a situation of dissonance. For whereas we now frown upon museums who dare to sell parts of their collection as a means to ensure income, this was turned into a standard practice for the Musée Rodin, with the difference that they first increased the collection in order to trade it off.

As the legal heirs to Rodin’s oeuvre *and* the artistic property rights, they were in the position to continue the process that Rodin had already started during his life: to make a living by the sale of reproductions. The artist may have been long dead, that did not mean that the production of his work had to stop. The role of producer now fell in the hands of the museum. The Musée Rodin did not just agree to anyone making multiples of the work by the artist and stipulated rules that would ensure the casts authenticity. Only bronze sculptures cast from original plaster or terracotta models by the hand of Rodin himself could qualify as ‘original editions’. (Le Normand-Romain, 2014). They created stamps of approval, and limited the ‘authentic’ casts to a series of twelve editions that were accompanied by certificates (Le Normand-Romain, 2014). The terminology that they wielded is also of great importance to our understanding of these newly produced works; only the museum had the authority to produce new originals. The unauthorised casts would be treated as copies, facsimiles, aftercasts or reproductions and would have to bear the sign of ‘reproduction’ for otherwise they would constitute as an infringement to Rodin’s moral rights (Le Normand-Romain, 2014). Legal ownership now determined artistic originality and authenticity, thereby detaching these concepts from the artist himself.

This also meant that the museum was now in power to change the story of Rodin, which we can see in one of the decisions from the first board meeting in 1919. The board report mentions that what they defined as ‘classic sculptures’ of Rodin (e.g. *The Thinker*, *The Age of Bronze*, *The Kiss* and *Saint John the Baptist*) would solely be sold in monumental size to public institutions. Only the bronze reductions of these classic sculptures were available to commercial sale (Challis, 2018). By this act, they turned the grand scale editions into the official scale, available to public viewing. The original plasters modelled by Rodin were, however, of a much smaller size. By placing the large casts in the museum space, we, as viewers, have thus come to see Rodin as this *grand creator*, something that he, in fact, was not.

In short, we can conclude that the Musée Rodin has made use of their inheritance as a commodity, a means of exchange to ensure income. At the same time, they were heavily involved in the monumentalising of these sculptures and underlining their singular and artistic state. The tension between the two ways of valuing the objects also caused an exchange of the properties of the two valuations. By exhibiting the works of Rodin and enhancing the aura pertaining to them, they also enhanced the market value of the object, turning them into higher valued commodities. How this worked, we will now see in the case study of Japan.

## 3.2 Big in Japan

### 3.2.1 The Rodin Boom

One of the first bronzes that reached Japan, was the *Burghers of Calais* in 1919, which was purchased for 200,000 francs, indicating a price increase of 170,000 francs from the original price in 1908 (Challis, 2018). The high demand for Rodin sculptures in Japan followed the so-called *Rodin Boom* that swayed the artistic circles of the country between 1904-1912 (Schoneveld, 2018). This boom found its origin in the power of the newly founded art magazines that disseminated and fostered new ideas on art and literature (Schoneveld, 2018). Especially the importance of the *Shirakaba* magazine as a cultural modality for propagating Rodin's popularity in Japan at this time has been acknowledged by several scholars (Challis, 2018; Lee, 2006; Schoneveld, 2018). The art magazine ran from 1910-1923 and was invaluable in the spread of reproductions and ideas of Western art in Japan. It offered a critical framework in the discussion of European modernism that greatly influenced the development of Japanese modernism (Schoneveld, 2018). *Shirakaba* formed a close knit with the Japanese avant-garde artists and writers who pondered on the new aesthetic and ideology of art. Rodin played a significant role in shaping the *Shirakaba* ideological stance, and the group's contact with him was the most influential of all their exchanges with European artists (Lee, 2006; Schoneveld, 2018).

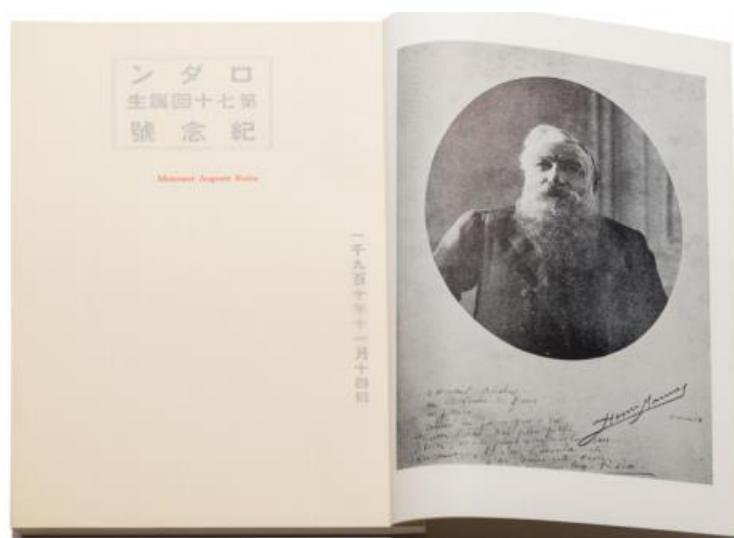


Figure 6. Rodin in *Shirakaba* (1910).

In celebration of his seventieth birthday in 1910, they devoted an entire edition to Rodin, with twenty-six essays and nineteen photographic reproductions of his work [fig.6]. In response, Rodin sent three miniature bronzes as a gift to this tribute. This was the first time that the members of Shirakaba were able to access original works by Rodin. Up until that point, they had to make do with photographs, drawings and even local imitations after photographs (Schoneveld, 2018). They often tried to set up an exhibition of his work in Japan, yet the funding always proved to be an obstacle (Lee, 2006). In Rodin, the Shirakaba found an idol who represented their thoughts on artistic judgement. In their view, the qualitative value of art did not lie in the technical skill, but in the individual personality of the artist, and in the way that this reflected his or her creative practice (Schoneveld, 2018).

The pursuit for individualism that Rodin represented also caused his critical downfall within the artistic circles of both Europe and Japan. Where the modern art of the 1920's developed into new and more abstract shapes, Rodin's concern with the sentimental and his opulent modelling style soon came to be viewed as outdated (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). The new aesthetic of the Japanese sculptors came to depend more on European sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi, while at the same time they started to emphasize their unique Japanese heritage as well (Lee, 2006). By any means, the *Rodin Boom* had come to an end in the *juste milieu* of Japan. The interest for Rodin by wealthy Japanese investors, however, had yet to begin.

### 3.2.2 The Business of *Rodinism*

The research of Challis (2018) on the economics of translocation has shown that, although there was an earlier interest of the Japanese businessmen in the acquiring of Rodin sculptures, they were only able to realise these sales after the artist's death. This was of course the time when the Musée Rodin increased the availability of artworks of the artists, while at the same time the Japanese yen experienced a great value increase against the franc, making the sculptures also economically more available. This comparative advantage accelerated the collecting of European artworks by Japanese businessmen, such as Kojiro Matsukata who claimed to own over 1,700 European artworks already by the year 1922, including ten marbles and forty bronzes by Auguste Rodin (Challis, 2018; Lee, 2006). Many of the Japanese private collectors who purchased the sculptures of Rodin were active in the international business of banking, textile trade and manufacturing, making them well-informed of the foreign exchange markets. Matsukata started his collection through his active agents in Europe, of whom Léonce Bénédict – the director of the Musée Rodin – was by far the most important (Challis, 2018). This relationship enabled Matsukata to be the first private collector in Japan to buy large numbers of work by Rodin. In his communication with the Musée Rodin, he often mentioned that he intended his collection to be used for the opening of a museum of modern Western art in Tokyo, a plan that was only realised in 1959. Matsukata may have jumped in the Rodin market at a time when it was economically viable to do so, his valuation of the work stretched beyond that. With the idea of opening a museum and showcasing the works of Rodin, the collector expressed his wish that the

Japanese public could learn from these sculptures. In a 1922 interview, he emphasized that the art of Rodin was not necessarily an example to follow for the Japanese artist, but a means to understand the psychology of Western people (Lee, 2006).

The Musée Rodin soon realised the great market potential in Japan, and they employed Hermann d'Oelsnitz as their commercial agent on location in 1922. With the support of the French ambassador to Japan, Paul Claudel, d'Oelsnitz set up the annual *Exhibition of French Contemporary Art* that ran until 1927 (Lee, 2006). The museum was actively involved in propagating *Lodanizumu*, Japanese for Rodinism, which refers to the cult of the artist (Lee, 2006). The phenomenon of Rodinism underlines the importance of the sculptor to the development of the Japanese taste for modernist art. These French exhibitions were great promotional events to the work of Rodin, and also stimulated business, as can be read from the board reports of the museum that discuss the successful sales made at these events (Challis, 2018). The exhibitions were mostly marketed at the wealthy private collectors, but in 1924 the Tokyo National Museum purchased the first sculpture by Rodin for a public collection from this exhibition. This purchase can be seen as a further step in the legitimising of the high cultural value of Rodin for Japan (Lee, 2006). This positive valuation for his work had shifted from the *juste milieu* to the larger audiences who still very much favoured Rodin over the avant-garde artists of the time that advocated a less accessible aesthetic and subject-matter.

The dissemination of Rodin sculptures to Japan was put to an abrupt halt in 1931 when the yen experienced a dramatic devaluation caused by the great economic depression of the time. The Musée Rodin lost an important market, yet continued their new business strategy enthusiastically. The museum now started to turn their eye to the United States, where Rodin had already been a favourite amongst collectors during his life (Elsen & Frankel Jamison, 2003). Yet the ten years of translocation of artworks to Japan had proven to be the most fruitful business for the museum. It has resulted in the second largest collection of Rodin sculptures in the world (only after the Musée Rodin), that is now housed in the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo. This collection was built through the generous donation of the Japanese private collectors who were so actively involved in the translocation process (Lee, 2006). What we can learn from this case study, it that these sculptures were produced and sold as a commodity by the Musée Rodin in France, but received a new valuation in the Japanese context where they came to be regarded as highly individual and singular works that found final artistic legitimisation within the Japanese museum walls. The translocation turned out to be more than just a shift of context: it indicated a shift in meaning as well.

## 4. Recreating Rodin

We will now make a jump in time to the year 1981 and turn our attention to the *Rodin Rediscovered* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. This exhibition was brought to life in order to shine new light on the sculptor whose reputation had fallen into eclipse for a few decades. It featured a new cast of *The Gates of Hell*, which was presented as the masterpiece of Rodin that had finally arrived in a state of completion. Yet this sense of completion was based on a reconstruction made decades after his death. Moreover, it was not the legal heirs of Rodin, the Musée Rodin, that requested this reconstruction, but an American institution, thereby giving away the authority to judge and classify the originality of his work. And was Rodin not the artist who advocated the aesthetic of the *non-finito*? How can we align that with the framing of this cast as a finished object? This edition of *The Gates* caused quite a stir in the artistic debate of the time and the question was raised on the meaning of originality in the work of Rodin. This dispute gives insights into the qualities that are valued in the works of Rodin and shows how people crave the mythology and aura surrounding the artist.

### 4.1 The *Real* Rodin

#### 4.1.1 Bronze Rediscovered

In the summer of 1981, visitors to the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC were treated to something the world had never seen before, or so they were meant to believe. The museum showcased a new edition of *The Gates of Hell* [fig. 7], what was considered the absolute, yet unfinished, masterpiece by Rodin (Janson, 1985). This new edition, however, was presented to the audience as the doors “that Rodin would have wanted to make” (Elsen, 1982, p. 107). Such a statement comes with a lot of interpretation, which has been acknowledged *and* justified by the museum curators in the exhibition catalogue (Elsen, 1981). The question that we will be dealing with is not whether these justifications are satisfying, but rather how this interpretation and reconstruction of *the Gates* has affected the valuation of Rodin. Moreover, why was this reconstruction made in the first place? What needs were catered to? What was apparently still missing in our understanding and valuation of Rodin?

In the first chapter to this thesis, we have seen that Rodin had abandoned work on *the Gates* by 1900, leaving it in an unfinished state after twenty years of devoted time and labour. The plaster cast was destroyed after its (incomplete) exposition at Place d’Alma and Rodin never had the intention to reconstruct the doors, having grown tired of them as he explained in several letters (Janson, 1985). Already during life he had received several request to continue work on the *Gates* as they were held to be a quintessential piece in his oeuvre. By the end of his life in 1917, he finally agreed to this but never personally worked on, nor supervised the reconstruction, but passed this job on to the museum’s

first director, Léonce Bénédite (Elsen, 1981). With this exhibition, the National Gallery of Art wanted to recreate the doors of Rodin, *as he would have envisioned them to become*. The name of the exhibition, *Rodin Rediscovered*, alludes to the idea that the curators found the solution to this missing link in Rodin's oeuvre. And indeed, the curators added something new to this edition of *the Gates* that had not been done before: the casting of the bronze doors using the lost-wax technique.



Figure 7. Auguste Rodin (1880-1900) – *The Gates of Hell*. Bronze cast in 1978. Stanford University.



Rodin had openly acknowledged in his writings that he favoured the lost-wax method of production over any other method (Beentjes, 2019). The lost-wax method is the oldest casting technique for bronze, that reclaimed authority during the Renaissance when monumental bronze sculptures were produced for the first time since Antiquity (Janson, 1985). The technique was immortalized by Italian sculptor Benvenuto Cellini in his autobiographical work *Vita* of 1567. In this book, he described the struggles he encountered when casting his *Perseus*, using the lost-wax technique, when they found out that they had run out of bronze. Cellini ultimately and heroically saved the day by throwing in his tin cutlery into the melting ovens. This story of Cellini regained prominence in the nineteenth-century when different casting techniques were at hand and the artist had to determine the best fit for his work (Beentjes, 2019). Lost-wax was considered the technique that rendered the greatest quality to the work and was associated with the artistic authenticity of Cellini, who was one of the few sculptors in history to have done his own casting. It was, however, a costly technique that required great skill and time. Even though Rodin favoured this procedure, he only had one work produced with the lost-wax technique: his first cast of the *Thinker*. That Rodin did not continue in the technique had everything to do with the artisanal nature of the technique that limited the output (Beentjes, 2019). The sand mould casting (that was initially developed to cast canons in a cheap manner) was much better suited to Rodin's taste, since it produced works quickly and economically. Indeed, it produced bronzes of inferior quality, yet it was a technique much easier to master for the foundries, whereas the lost-wax bronzes often ended up in bad shape due to the inexperience of the founders (Beentjes, 2019).

#### 4.1.2 Performing Authenticity

Casting the *Gates* in 1978 with a foundry that was equipped to turn the cast into high quality bronze, might have done justice to the wish that Rodin had expressed for his doors (though it rested on a great deal of interpretation), it remained an act of anachronism. For how did the authority to decide when the work of Rodin had reached a state of completion end up with the National Gallery in Washington, almost a century after the conception of the work? During his life, Rodin had abandoned work on the doors not because they were finished, but because he did not know how to finish them. His undetermined stance against the *Gates* is part of the real history of the work, which is negated by this act of completing the task in the 1970's. That the National Gallery now decided to reconstruct the already reassembled plaster casts of Rodin's doors from 1918, is a sign of their quest to find the *real* Rodin. What was supposed to become his greatest achievement, but has always remained unfinished, apparently left a feeling of discontent to the artworld. But what were they exactly trying to capture with this reconstruction?

The *Rodin Rediscovered* exhibition, in fact, tried to reveal the *most authentic* Rodin ever made: the artwork that had remained hidden in his mind. The new *Gates of Hell* was also presented to the visitor in a recreation of its original context to make the story more convincing. The National Gallery had recreated the appearance of the Salons from the 1870's that were held at the Palais

d'Industrie in Paris (Hunisak, 1981). Rodin's work was thus revealed in the kind of setting in which his contemporaries would have seen it, with the difference of a decade or two. Staging the work in a perceived 'original' context places the visitor in the illusion of a different time and place, underlining the (performed) authenticity of this version of the *Gates*. The reviewers of the time were overwhelmed by the beauty of the new *Gates of Hell* that showed greater detail in its bronze than ever before due to the superb patination (Hunisak, 1981). In this way, the visitor had the opportunity to discover (not rediscover) elements in the work that have never been seen (or present) before. The magnitude and beauty of this new work have only contributed to the public adoration of Rodin, yet it remains uncertain (or fantastical) if these qualities can really be ascribed to him. This was also a concern to a prominent art critic of that time, who saw this tension between the concepts of authenticity and reproduction as a prelude to the postmodern debate on originality.

#### 4.2 The *October* Dispute: Krauss versus Elsen

The art critic in question was Rosalind Krauss, whose scholarship focused on postmodern painting, sculpture and photography. She used the occasion of the exhibition to explore the issues of originality from a postmodernist perspective in her essay *The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition* that she published in the *October* magazine<sup>8</sup>. In her essay, she accused the National Gallery of presenting 'a fake', and the cult around the artist to be based on lies (Krauss, 1981, p. 47). To her, there is altogether no such thing as a 'genuine Rodin'. The artist himself is namely accused of being caught up in the ethos of mechanical reproduction, thereby reducing all his sculptures to reproductions that exist in the absence of an original. Krauss concludes her argument by stating that the ever-continuous reproducibility of Rodin's work would not ever have been a problem to the sculptor himself, whom she described as an artist "so quickly induced to participate in the transformation of his own work into kitsch" (Krauss, 1981, p.53).

This degradation of Rodin's art to kitsch did not sit well with Rodin-expert and curator to the exhibition, Albert Elsen, who decided to reply in the form of a letter in the same *October* magazine. His argumentation was based on calling out how it was not the museum, but Krauss, who presented fraudulent information and an anachronistic definition of originality that Rodin could never live up to (Elsen, 1982). He justified the artistic valuation of Rodin's work by placing his originality not in his production, but in his *conceptions*, and gives historical arguments for this claim. It is the mind, or the genius, of Rodin that once again receives the greatest acclaim, and history has shown that the art community agreed with Elsen on this (Parigoris, 1997). Krauss responded a final time with another letter in *October*, but the case was already settled: the postmodernist debate had no lasting influence

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<sup>8</sup> *October* is a peer-reviewed academic journal specializing in contemporary art, criticism and theory and was founded in 1976 by Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss herself, after working for *Artforum*. According to Encyclopædia Britannica, the journal was an "influential vehicle for the debate surrounding the emergence of postmodernism and New Historicism in 20th-century art-historical studies".

on the valuation of Rodin in artistic circles. The questions on originality that Krauss raised in her essay seem legit in light of this thesis, yet they were immediately cast aside by intermediaries of Rodin's work. That might have everything to do with the fact that Krauss not only raised questions, but also placed a negative value judgement on the artist and his work, reducing it to kitsch. Her judgement went straight against the popular cult of the artist and left little room for negotiation.

### 4.3 The Aftermath

After the installation of the lost-wax version of the *Gates of Hell*, four more were commissioned by museums worldwide. These reconstructions were thereby further institutionalized in the museum world and recognized as original artworks. So what can we learn from this example on the valuation of Rodin's work? It should first be remarked that the narrative of this object ends in a different way than we might have expected. The dissonance occurred when the new object was made in 1978 and publicly exhibited in 1981, yet recognized as an artwork dating between the years 1880-1900. It is recognized as an original work of Rodin, yet it does not follow the strict rules set out by the Musée Rodin. First of all, the Rodin museum was not initiator of this new cast, since this role was taken up by the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation who commissioned the work for the National Gallery of Art (Elsen, 1981). The Musée Rodin did, however, give its approval for the casts. Second, the cast was not based on a plaster or terracotta model by the hands of Rodin himself. The plaster that was used was already a posthumous reconstruction by the first director of the Musée Rodin, based on an unfinished conception of the artist.

In the way that this work is valued as an original, the role of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation is completely negated, even though they are the factual producers of the work. The originality of the work was defended by Elsen (1981, 1982) when he stated that this work followed the *intention* of Rodin for his doors and that his true originality did not lie in the production of his work, but in his conceptions, his genius. When he called these doors "one of the greatest imaginative works of art in history" (Elsen, 1981), he underlined once more that conception now determines originality. Moreover, the entire issue of reproductions is swept off the table by claiming that production does not determine originality. This work has come closest to represent Rodin's genius, exactly because it was unspoiled by the reality of his time – where he had to make rational choices on what casting technique to use and whether his work on the *Gates* would pay off when the commission had come to a stop. Our vision of his genius has thus been shaped by modern interpreters of his work who thereby further supported the aura and cult of the artist, both in the art world and public opinion. Yet these lost-wax *Gates of Hell* are as much a product of Rodin from the 1880's, as from the American scholars of the 1980's. The dissonance of this situation is best described by how something that started out as kitsch (the postmodern label notwithstanding) turned out to become the most original work of Rodin ever, valuing it as the highest form of Art (with a capital A).

## 5. Celebrating a Pop Icon

In this fifth and final chapter we will discuss the celebrations of 2017 that commemorated the centennial death of Auguste Rodin. In order to honour the sculptor, the Musée Rodin organized *Rodin 100: Centenaire Auguste Rodin 1917-2017* with worldwide exhibitions devoted to the sculptor. We will look into two of these exhibitions: the *Rodin-Kiefer* exhibition at the Musée Rodin, and the centrepiece *Rodin, the Centenary Exhibition* at the Grand Palais in Paris. What more value could these exhibitions bring to such a celebrated artist? Some of his works, such as *the Thinker* and *the Kiss* had already achieved iconic status and have made the artist instantly recognizable throughout the world. This iconic status of the artist was further extended with the new products in the Musée Rodin shop: a limited series of ‘authentic reproductions’. These authentic reproductions make the sculptures available to everyone for the first time and seem to be the final stage in the commodification process of Rodin’s work. From the world of the high arts, his work has now moved into the realm of popular culture. How can we understand the tension between the commodification on the one hand, and the artistic celebration on the other? And how has this process affected the valuation of his work?

### 5.1 The Centennial Tribute

#### 5.1.1 Rodin the Iconoclast

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Auguste Rodin’s death could not pass by unnoticed, and so the Musée Rodin, together with the Réunion des Musées Naionaux , initiated the yearlong Centennial Tribute to the artist to take place in 2017. But what more was there to say about this artist who had already achieved such fame? In our times, Rodin does not suffer from a lack of exposure, so what more could a tribute add to his status? The Musée Rodin opted for a reinterpretation of his work by contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer (1945-present). At first glance, these two artist do not make an obvious pairing for the commemoration of the sculptor. So what did the museum try to achieve with this exhibition? And how did it influence the valuation of Rodin?

The Musée Rodin gave Anselm Kiefer carte blanche in setting up his exhibition in the museum that permanently functions as a tribute to the artist, not just at the occasion of the centennial celebration. The exhibition showed Rodin according to Kiefer, framing the sculptor in the contemporary artistic milieu. What Kiefer tried to do, was to show the unusual convergences between the two artists (Micchelli, 2017). The similarities should not be found in art as a final product, as Kiefer located the convergence in their creative process (Corbett, 2017). He used the history of the museum as Rodin’s former studio to create an intimate view of the artist at work. Kiefer decided not to include the overfamiliar works by Rodin, such as *the Thinker* or *the Kiss*, but brought from Rodin’s

studio in Meudon<sup>9</sup> the plaster and terracotta fragments that Rodin used in his assemblages. Kiefer held the opinion that Rodin “was all about process”, which these plaster fragments are a testament to (Corbett, 2017). By putting his own work in dialogue to Rodin’s, he in fact accentuated the contemporaneity of the latter’s creative process, underlining his value for the artistic milieu of today.

The works that Kiefer presented by his own hand were all specifically created for this occasion. We could therefore consider Kiefer’s work to be a reinterpretation of that of Rodin. One of the key items in the exhibition was Kiefer’s painting *Les Cathédrales de France* [fig.8], created as a testament to the similarly titled book by Rodin where he explored his own fascination with the medieval architecture of the cathedral constructions (Corbett, 2017). This book was republished for the centenary, and by involving a contemporary artist in the project, the Musée Rodin created a new relevance for the publication. By the creation of the painting, Kiefer, in fact, made a move that we could compare to the one described in the previous chapter: he rendered (new) shape to the interior mind of Rodin. He continued the work that Rodin started in his writings, but transferred it into the medium of painting. Yet, at the same time, his work differs greatly from the new bronze cast of *The Gates of Hell* from the previous chapter, as it bears Kiefer’s authorship alone. His painting does not change our conception of Rodin’s oeuvre, it merely offers an alternative perspective to it.



Figure 8. Anselm Kiefer (2016). *Les Cathédrales de France*. Musée Rodin, Paris.

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<sup>9</sup> The former villa and studio of Rodin in Meudon, where he lived for the last twenty years of his life, are part of the Musée Rodin in Paris. The Meudon museum holds only the plaster models and study objects of Rodin, except for one monumental bronze *Thinker*. This *Thinker* watches over the tomb of Rodin and his wife Rose, who both lay buried here.

This exhibition stood out from the centennial tribute, since it seemingly did nothing to (further) monumentalize Rodin as a French national symbol. He was stripped from his greatest achievements and was only presented in his plaster fragments. Kiefer had alluded to this effect when he was asked for his inspiration to the exhibition. He referred to the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke, who started his monography on Rodin in the following way: “Rodin was solitary before fame came to him, and afterward he became perhaps still more solitary. For fame is ultimately the summary of all misunderstandings that crystallize around a new name” (Rilke, 1907, as cited in Micchelli, 2017). We could therefore assume that Kiefer tried to artistically dismantle the fame of Rodin and create a new image of the sculptor that was not based on misunderstandings. This new image of Rodin did not consist of him as the carver of monuments, an image that Rodin had so feverishly tried to cultivate during life (Stephens, 2011). This new perspective of Rodin instead showed him in his fragmentations rather as a destroyer of monuments, a veritable iconoclast. Kiefer explained that Rodin’s iconoclasm could also be stretched to its more metaphorical meaning, as someone who “attacks cherished beliefs or venerated institutions” (Micchelli, 2017). In this sense, the exhibition actually underlines the myth of Rodin as a rebel in art, someone who went against common beliefs and tastes in order to establish a new aesthetic. (Zucker, 1969). This vision of the artist as a rebel has grown in popularity since the nineteenth century and holds particular appeal to a broader (i.e. non-artistic) public (Zucker, 1969). As much as the exhibition tried to offer a new perspective of the artist, it coincidentally further enhanced the image of Rodin that was already circulating.

### 5.1.2 Rodin the Influencer

The Réunion des musées nationaux decided to place the centrepiece of the centennial tribute in one of the most prominent exhibition spaces of France, the Grand Palais in Paris. This large hall was erected for the Universal Exposition of 1900 for the purpose of housing the greatest artistic events in the city of Paris. That Rodin should be exhibited there now in commemoration of his death, comes with some irony since he was refused participation in the official program of the Universal Exhibition in 1900, which is why he erected his own pavilion at Place de l’Alma. Being exhibited at the Grand Palais now, thus concludes the institutionalization of the artist and the universal acceptance of his work in the cultural canon.

The exhibition itself followed the lines set out by the Musée Rodin and was an exploration of the sculptor’s influence on modern art. The display consisted of over 200 works the Rodin and also contained sculptures and drawings by artists such as Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). The purpose of the exhibition was to highlight how sculptors have appropriated Rodin’s aesthetics, while at the same time shed new light on his creative universe (Goldmann, 2017). This was done by the display of plaster casts by Rodin, but in a different way from the Musée Rodin. Where the museum showed little-known fragmentary pieces, the Grand Palais offered the public a view on the plaster models of Rodin’s most

famous works, such as *the Thinker* and even a monumental plaster cast of *the Gates of Hell*. Exhibiting the plaster models and casts instead of the well-known bronzes, could be understood as an effort to present the ‘real’ Rodin through models that show signs of his handling of the material (Goldmann, 2017). Looking at plasters of well-known bronzes could have caused some feelings of dissonance for the visitor, since it shows a familiar image that at the same time feels very unfamiliar. The details and shadow effects that mesmerize in bronze, are completely lost in the absorbing materiality of white plaster (Parigoris, 1997). The plasters render a sort of rawness to the sculptures that is not present in the refined bronze cast. The emphasis on the creative process can be seen as a final attempt to show a new side to Rodin that has not been seen before, thereby trying to create a more direct link between the contemporary public and the artist who died a century ago.

In their commemoration of the artist, both of the exhibitions moved away from the well-known (versions of the) works that made Rodin into a national symbol. Instead of further monumentalizing what was already known and loved about the artist, these exhibitions tried to create a more intimate viewing of his work that laid bare his creative process. Once again, the valuation of the artist was mostly aimed at his conceptions, his mind, and not the final stage of the artwork in finished condition. The visual clichés that pertained to his work, were cleverly avoided to give new artistic relevance to the artist. The marketing around the centennial tribute, however, relied heavily on these clichés.

## 5.2 Shopping for Rodin

### 5.2.1 From Trinkets to Original Reproductions

The museum shop holds a special place inside the museum institute. It might even be described as a site of dissonance, which at the same time belongs and does not belong to the museum. There is a tension between the core business of the museum, which is the protection and display of art objects, and the commercial business that includes the sale of products (Frieling, 2016). These products sold in the museum shop are not considered to be art objects, even though there are sold in close proximity to the galleries and within the same museum walls. The juxtaposition between the objects that stay within the museum and those that leave (Frieling, 2016) is less clear in the case of the Musée Rodin where the commercial business is part of the core business, not solely in support of the latter, as we have seen in chapter three of this thesis. In fact, we could take a look at the workings of the museum shop to see if this place constitutes as the final destination in the commodification process of Rodin’s sculptures.

The museum shop is a place that sells souvenirs: a thing that is kept as a reminder of Rodin and the museum. It therefore heavily depends on instant-recognizable images, the visual clichés. The web shop of the Musée Rodin has been dubbed *La Boutique* in order to give it an air of exclusivity, even though the entire concept of the shop rests on its *accessibility*. They sell the books on the artist, but also stationary, jewellery and fashion that are decorated with images of the artist’s work [fig.9].

The relation between these items for sale and the art objects is one of association. But the museum shop also sells miniature – and drawing reproductions of the artist, making the lines between what is available to everyone (commodity) and what is not (art) blurry. These boundaries have been broken down even further by a new collection of reproduction especially introduced for the artist’s centenary.



Figure 9. Three products of the Musée Rodin Boutique. © Rodin Museum - Paris

These new reproductions can be purchased as ‘authentic reproductions’; a term that seems most conflicting. The website of the museum’s boutique gives information on how these new reproductions have been lifted to the status of (semi-)originals ([boutique.musee-rodin.fr](http://boutique.musee-rodin.fr)). These reproductions have been made *from* the original mould, yet not *out* of the original mould. The museum explains on the website that a team of restorers first focuses on the restoration of the original moulds, that are over 100 year old. From this original mould, a second mould is created in which the craftsmen (as they label them) pour in the material ([boutique.musee-rodin.fr](http://boutique.musee-rodin.fr)). This material is not the bronze that was used for the artworks, but the inferior polyurethane resin that later receives a finish of either marble dust or bronze patination in order to imitate the artistic materiality. Each of these reproductions is validated and checked by the museum curators in order to ensure respect for moral rights. The symbol and description “Reproduction – musée Rodin” ensure the authenticity of the sculptural reproduction. These authentic reproductions are not easily ordered from the web shop, but are available on demand. The website informs potential buyers that they need to contact Ugo Lachendowier, who is in charge of the commercial department of the museum. These official reproductions come at a cost of €5,900.00 for an originally sized *Thinker* [fig.10] in patinated bronze, and even €34,800.00 for the originally sized *Kiss* [fig.11] patinated with marble powder ([boutique.musee-rodin.fr](http://boutique.musee-rodin.fr)).





Figure 10. Reproduction *The Thinker* & Figure 11. Reproduction *The Kiss*. © Rodin Museum - Paris

These authentic reproduction do not simply try to imitate the appearance of the art works, but even the entire process of creation. Like in art, the production start with a commission. Yet instead of contacting the artist (or his representatives) directly, the customer needs to negotiate with the person who looks after the commercial interests of the museum. This is already an indication that - even though the process is meant to give an air of exclusivity (further supported by the high prices paid for the reproductions) - these resin-based objects are really created as commodities. The value of these commodities is enhanced by giving it the appearance of a singular artwork, for example by the signature of “Reproduction – musée Rodin” that is supposed to give the reproduction a proof of originality. Whereas the artwork bear the name of Auguste Rodin, the reproductions carry the signature of the museum, which adds to the idea that they are selling something real, something that is exclusive like art. So why is this so different then from art? The museum has been selling new, original casts for decades that constitute as real Rodins. They have set up strict rules in order to define what is an original cast and what is not, yet as we have seen with the 1978 edition of the *Gates of Hell*, these rules could be bend. The concepts of originality and authenticity have often been challenged by the Musée Rodin, yet why are these 2017 objects so easily labelled as reproductions? Does the problem lie in the materiality of these original reproductions? Is it the signature? Or is it the space in which these reproductions circulate that define their status as commodity: the space of popular culture?

### 5.2.2 From Artist to Pop Icon

This part of the thesis will draw from the previous research by Grossman (2001) who investigated the path of another nineteenth-century classic from the world of the high arts into popular culture: Victor Hugo. Her starting point was the Disneyfication of the literary work *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) in the twentieth century, but could bear many resemblances to the valuation process of the sculptures of Rodin. In the process of popularization, Grossman distinguishes three types of relationships that can exist between the original artwork and its reductions. The first is representation, where the reduction adheres more or less to the original and there is fidelity to the conception of the work. The second relationship is that of extrapolation, which described the creative enterprises that are only loosely connected to the work. The final type is commodification that points to the strictly commercial exploitation of cultural properties. In which category can we place the Boutique objects, and specifically the authentic reproductions?

The question that needs to be asked first, is how the work of Rodin has been altered in order to make it marketable. When looking at the T-shirts and necklaces [fig. 9], we can see that a simplification of form has taken place. The simplification doesn't end there, for these products are also eliminated from the complex themes and abstract ideas that the work of Rodin portrays. When we look at these products, do they invoke the same effect as the original work does? Does one need interaction with the original to enjoy the souvenirs? In fact, these products do not require such interaction since they offer a completely different aesthetic experience from the artworks. Grossman (2001) speaks on the reducing of the intellectually stimulating quality of art in order to make it more marketable, and we could say that this has also happened with the Rodin sculptures. They have become images that depend on their power of instant recognition and gratification, instead of on personal reflection. The artist has been turned into an artefact.

Does this also hold true for the authentic reproductions that are of the same form as the original artworks? And what happens to the value of Rodin himself when his works – most particularly the *Thinker* – have become popular icons, as familiar to people all over the world as Mickey Mouse? Grossman (2001) has argued that reproductions have killed the author, if not the idea of authorship. When looking at the trinkets, this idea is very convincing, since they do not need Rodin as an artist in order to exist and sell. Yet this is more complex for the original reproductions series, since they rest on the aura of the artist that appeals to the modern-day consumer who is seduced to share a bit in this aura by purchasing a reproduction. Yet is the narrative and meaning of these original artworks still present in these reductions that would render them the singular state of art?

For this we have to go back to the meaning of the Rodin's art and what is exactly being valued in it. Every time, we have seen that the originality of his work is placed in his conceptions, his genius. We have been told that the only way to get close to this, is through the reconstruction of his creative process. The idea that plaster and terracotta models bear the signs of his handling of the material is thus what renders them such great value. It is an idea that has been constantly been brought up in the

valorisation of Rodin, also in the centennial exhibitions. They have a unique presence in time and space, which is at the base of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura. That the aura has been extended to later bronze casts and marble carvings is the result of their contextualization in the museum space and their legitimation by these institutions. As long as the reduction was a truthful representation of the original conception and creative process of Rodin, it was valued as art. As convincing as these 2017 reductions might appear, they are not valued as original works of art. That is because these reproductions do not follow the creative process as laid out by Rodin, but are created with modern techniques and materials. They do not have a singular narrative that could render them the status of art, but are rather transhistorical objects.

In the end, both the trinkets and the reproductions could be classified within the third relationship to the original work of art, as set out by Grossman (2001): the commodity. The reproductions might seem to adhere more or less to the original work of art; they are not truthful to the original conceptions. Both types of products have been created for their transaction value, whereby the cultural value of Rodin has been exploited.

It is not my intention here to make a value judgement on the shift of Rodin into popular culture, since popular modes of entertainment have existence value and are natural conduits to more elitist culture. Moreover, we could argue that commercial efforts help to create new audiences for the works by Rodin. Although this argument is also easily reversed by saying that the commercial activities debase the artworks, since the consumers will not be attracted to the sculptor's work anymore or will approach his art with terrible misconceptions.

The point that *is* important to make here, is on how the valuation of Rodin is changed through the creation and sales of these commodity products that refer to his work. The popular image of the artist has been stripped of his personal narrative and complexity, reducing the artist to the producer of pretty and marketable images that are pleasing to large audiences. The worldwide celebration of the artist in fact underlines this idea, making the exhibitions mass gatherings, the individual objectives of the exhibitions notwithstanding. The valuation of his work does not only take place anymore in the artistic milieu, but in the realm of the public taste. The biography of Rodin thus ends with his transformation of Artist into Pop Icon.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary

This thesis set out to deconstruct the myth of artistic genius surrounding the sculptor Auguste Rodin. How did this take shape, and how did it evolve over the years? This myth has been aligned with the concepts of originality and authenticity as these were singled out as the distinguishing features that give an object its aura of art. The idea of aura was further measured in dialogue with the reproductive nature of the sculptures by Rodin, which, according to Benjamin's theory (1935), would debase in reproducible artworks. We have seen, however, that this did not necessarily happen in the case of Rodin and in four episodes we have explored how the reproducibility and the valuation of art have been tied together in his work. The research question that this thesis tried to answer was how the reproducible nature of sculpture affected the valuation of originality and authenticity in the work of Rodin. Now, let's see if we can give an answer to that question.

First, we saw how the reproducible nature of sculpture was welcomed by the artist, who was able to realise a great market potential through the sales of multiples. It allowed him to achieve great commercial value, by setting up a workshop that was based on the principles of craftsmanship. In order to elevate these objects that left his workshop to the singular state of art, Rodin had to give these multiples an air of exclusivity that would render them as original works of art. His aesthetic of the *non-finito* created a false illusion of authenticity that convinced the *juste milieu* of his time.

After his death, his works moved into a new stage of duplication when his legal heirs saw the potential of making money through the sale of posthumous casts. The legal heirs to his work were at the same time responsible for the permanent and official institutionalisation of the sculptor, since they were, in fact, the Musée Rodin. The legitimisation that they provided to his work, in fact raised the market value of these reproductions as well. They framed the posthumous casts from their own production as original works by Rodin, making a statute that declares what constitutes as an authentic work and what does not. The fact that the museum decided to put out more sculptures of Rodin caused a worldwide dispersal of his work. We have seen that in the case of Japan, Rodin had already achieved high artistic value within their own *juste milieu* before the newly cast reproductions reached their shores. It was only after Rodin's work set foot in the country that a larger audience was able to enjoy it as well, giving his work public valorisation.

For a few decades, the reproduction process of Rodin's work had remained more or less the same, until the American Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation decided to reconstruct a missing link in the oeuvre of Rodin. Even though his aesthetic rested on the principle of the *non-finito*, there was actually just one work that had remained unfinished: his *Gates of Hell*. This monumental work held such a fascination to the artworld, that the American foundation decided to commission and supervise a reconstruction of the work. This reconstruction was not just based on how Rodin had left his work in

1900, but also on how he would have wanted it to become, if it were to reach completion. When it was revealed at the *Rodin Rediscovered* exhibition of 1981, it was soon viewed as the most authentic work by the artist. Discussion on the real originality of the work was soon cast aside, as both the art critics and the larger public accepted the vision that this foundation wanted to portray of the artwork. It was especially *because* this work was a reconstruction of Rodin's artistic genius, not flawed by the historical reality, that it was valued as the most original work by the sculptor.

The concluding stage of the reproduction process of Rodin's sculptures took place in contemporary times, at the Centennial Tribute of his death in 2017. The sculptor was commemorated by a mass celebration in the form of worldwide exhibitions. Two of the key shows tried to show a side to the sculptor that had been left unattended so far. These ambitions, however, only supported further the myth of artistic genius by placing his originality in his creative process and singular mind. The merchandize that accompanied the Centennial Tribute provided a different perspective. The merchandize rested on the popular image of Rodin and stripped his work of its complexity in order to attain a higher degree of instant recognizability and satisfaction. A special edition of 'authentic reproductions' was launched that made the work of Rodin available to all by the use of cheap and inferior material. The Musée Rodin tried to render these reproductions with an air of authenticity by pouring them in casts from the original mould, and making the purchase an exclusive undertaking. They were, however, not lifted to the status of art, but remained commodities as they did nothing to adhere to the truthfulness of Rodin's conception. The production of these commodities for public entertainment moreover transferred to image of the sculptor. Though still physically present within artistic museum spaces worldwide, he has moved into the popular realm through these reproductions, turning the artist into an icon of popular culture.

In conclusion, we could say that there is a strong relation between the reproducible nature of Rodin's work and the valuation of it, which fluctuates over time. The reproducibility threatened to reduce the work of art to the state of a commodity, but this has been prevented by both the artist himself as by the museum institutions that both produce and exhibit his work. At the same time, we have seen that the reproducible nature sometimes even enhanced the idea of authenticity and originality in the work of Rodin, thereby challenging Benjamin's theory (1935). It is just in our times, when his work reached the scale of mass production and lost all sense of exclusivity, that the aura threatens to leave the work of Rodin, opening the door to a veritable democratisation of his work, but also to its commodification.

## 6.2 Valorising this Thesis

This thesis adheres to Rodin's aesthetic of the *non-finito* in the sense that it raised questions that could not find a complete answer within the small scope of this research. This research has given insight on how we have come to value one of the most beloved artists of our times by delving deep into the

production process of his work. It therefore provides new insights on how to value reproducible artworks as singular artworks. This thesis could therefore be a good starting point to explore the difference in valuation between different artforms, such as painting (non-reproducible) and sculpture (reproducible). This is a discussion often raised in the discipline of art history, but I hope this thesis has shown that it has relevance for the field of cultural economics, too.

This thesis worked with various theories on valuation and valorisation, of which Kopytoff's (1984) theory on the cultural biography of things proved to be the most enlightening. The reproducibility of sculpture both supports and challenges our conceptions of commodities and shows that it is within a specific context that the meaning of a work is established. This thesis has, however, also shown that it is not just outside context that determine the value of an object, but that some inherent qualities invite to certain readings and valuations. In the case of Rodin, this was really his aesthetic that invoked the reading of authenticity.

One of the things that could be further explored is of course the effect of reproducibility on market valuations. This thesis placed more emphasis on the non-market valuation of the works of Rodin, but not because it was not an interesting topic of investigation. The problem lies more in the great complexity of the market valuation of Rodin, that would be better served as a whole new topic for a thesis. When looking at the auction results for Rodin, we can see a wide range of prices, starting from a few thousand to over twenty million euros spent for an individual work. This fragmented market is the result of the great uncertainty that surrounds his work, which is not only brought about by the great number of reproductions, but also of the countless false castings. The Musée Rodin has tried to fight the many cases of fraud by providing certifications of authenticity to their own productions, but this has not yet stabilized the market. In 2004, the Comité Rodin had been established to create a catalogue raisonné of his work, which was set to be published in 2014 but is currently still in preparation due to the distorted market of his sculptures. When this is released, it will provide greater certainty to the buyers. Until that time, the Rodin market remains a complex, yet fascinating topic of investigation.

Within the scope of this research, this thesis also had its limitations. One of the things that could have enhanced the research was through a more thorough use of original source material. Almost all of the research was conducted through the use of literary sources that were already an interpretation of the primary sources. For some chapters, this was not a problem since these interpretations themselves were also the topic of investigation, making them primary sources to this research. For the first two chapters, however, it would have provided a more honest representations of facts than what I was able to access. This source material was unfortunately impossible to access at the moment of writing. This thesis was namely conducted in the time of a worldwide quarantine, which limited the scope of available resources.

Even though this thesis investigated the valuation of an artist that had been dead for over a hundred years, its content is still very topical since the reproduction and worldwide dispersal of his

work continues to this day. Last year, the final plans for an auxiliary branch of the Musée Rodin were revealed. It announced that a new museum for Rodin will be erected in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, which is the country's technology capital (Brown, 2019). The Paris museum will sell fifty bronze editions of his work, as well as giving the museum a loan for fifty other works for the period of five years, which will enable the Chinese branch some time to acquire their own collection for the new Rodin Art Centre. This new museum raises questions on the value of his art to the region, but also on how it will affect the valuation of the artist. For what does a monument to a Frenchman do all the way in China? It is an indicator that Rodin is not just considered a national hero to the French state, but that his stardom is more universal. Like his work, the meaning and value of Auguste Rodin the Artist is open to various interpretations.

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