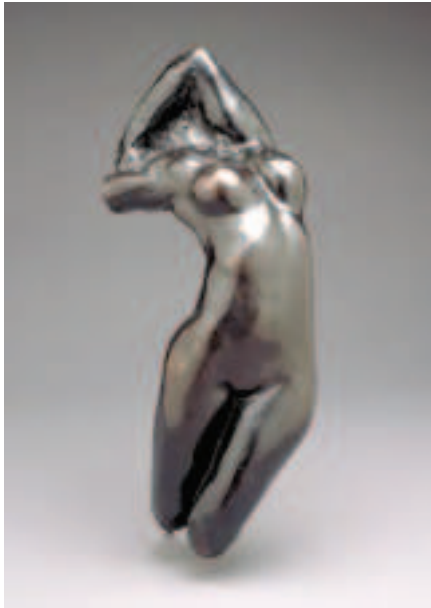


Object of the Month of April by Linda Krueger



Object title: **Torso of Adele**

Artist: Auguste Rodin (pronounced [oh-goost roh-dan](#))

Date: 1880

Medium: Bronze Sculpture

Accession #: 80.54.2a,b

Gallery: G353

Questions/Activities:

(Note: My theme is “Seeking the Essence in the Human Figure” so my questions and activities relate to that theme.)

- We are now in the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Galleries and are going to explore this sculpture by Auguste Rodin. Please take a moment to study it carefully. What one word would you use to describe this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Let’s compare this sculpture to Ganymede and the Eagle. Other than the obvious differences (bronze vs. marble, female vs. male), what strikes you as the biggest differences? What do you see that makes you say that?
- In Rodin’s eyes, the artist produces no willful distortion, adds no deliberate emphasis or exaggeration: it is Nature itself that guides the perception and the feeling of the talented artist. Rodin said, “I see all the truth, and not only that of the outside. I accentuate the lines which best express the spiritual state that I interpret.” What do you think is the spiritual state or essence of this figure? What do you see that makes you say that?

Key Points:

- **Historical/Social Context:** Modernity reflected the emergence of a new kind of society in the wake of three revolutions: the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Driven by technological progress and characterized by rapid change, the 19th century gave birth to our industrialized middle-class culture of mass production, mass advertising, and mass consumption, including the mass consumption of leisure activities such as shopping, going to entertainments, and visiting art museums.

- **Art History Context:** Between the 1848 upheaval and the 1870 Paris Commune, French Academic Art reigned. Heroes, goddesses, nymphs from ancient mythology, biblical prophets, allegorical virtues populated the paintings and sculptures. Exhibitions took place in juried Salons and artistic training was concentrated in prestigious academies. For every occasion, for every statement, there was a pre-approved pose, a fixed list of attributes; there was harmony, the perfect balance of proportions, the straight lines of the Greek profile.

The second half of the 19th century has been called the positivist age, an age of faith in the positive consequences of close observation of the natural and human realms. In the visual arts, the positivist spirit is most obvious in the decline of Romanticism in favor of the accurate and apparently objective description of the ordinary, observable world. Positivist thinking is evident in the new movement of Realism in painting and in many other artistic developments of the period after 1850 -- from the development of photography, capable of recording nature with unprecedented accuracy, to the highly descriptive style of academic art, to Impressionism's almost scientific emphasis on the optical properties of light and color.

- **The Artist:** François-Auguste-René Rodin (12 November 1840 – 17 November 1917), known as Auguste Rodin was a French sculptor. Although Rodin is generally considered the progenitor of modern sculpture, he did not set out to rebel against the past. He was schooled traditionally, took a craftsman-like approach to his work, and desired academic recognition, although he was never accepted into Paris's foremost school of art.

Sculpturally, Rodin possessed a unique ability to model a complex, turbulent, deeply pocketed surface in clay. Many of his most notable sculptures were roundly criticized during his lifetime. They clashed with the predominant figure sculpture tradition, in which works were decorative, formulaic, or highly thematic. Rodin's most original work departed from traditional themes of mythology and allegory, modeled the human body with realism, and celebrated individual character and physicality. Rodin was sensitive of the controversy surrounding his work but refused to change his style. Successive works brought increasing favor from the government and the artistic community.

From the unexpected realism of his first major figure to the unconventional memorials whose commissions he later sought, Rodin's reputation grew, such that he became the preeminent French sculptor of his time. By 1900, he was a world-renowned artist. Wealthy private clients sought Rodin's work, and he kept company with a variety of high-profile intellectuals and artists. His sculpture suffered a decline in popularity after his death in 1917 but within a few decades his legacy solidified. Rodin remains one of the few sculptors widely known outside the visual arts community.

The son of an inspector in the Paris Préfecture de Police and a former seamstress, Auguste Rodin grew up in a working-class district of Paris. His early instruction was provided by the "Petit École", a school for the training of decorative artists, where he acquired a thorough grounding in the traditions of French eighteenth-century art, and by informal studies of anatomical structure under the tutelage of Antoine-Louis Barye, the French Romantic sculptor, best known for his animal subjects. Refused entrance to the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts, Rodin escaped the rigid Neoclassical training that still dominated its curriculum in the mid-1850s, but forfeited the early success that École graduates were ordinarily assured.

Instead, Rodin served a long and difficult apprenticeship. For many years, he was employed as a modeler in the Paris studio of the highly successful and prolific sculptor Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse (1824–1887), and later, during the economic chaos that followed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, he followed Carrier-Belleuse to Belgium, where he continued as an assistant in the sculptor's temporarily transplanted studio. There he became a partner of the Belgian Antoine (Joseph) Van Rasbrough in the execution of monumental stone sculptures that included the allegorical groups of Africa and Asia for the Brussels Bourse. While in Brussels, Rodin also modeled a number of

decorative female figures and busts of young women, to which he began to sign his own name.

In 1876, Rodin traveled to Italy where he was deeply impressed by the work of Michelangelo, who would influence his own sculpture for years to come. This experience provided a rich foundation for the series of nude male figures that he began to create in the late 1870s, including the MIA's *The Bronze Age*.

The increasingly erotic character of Rodin's sculpture in the 1880s can be explained by his preoccupation with two highly charged literary sources: Dante's *Inferno* and Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*. In Dante's epic poem, Rodin seems to have been most deeply impressed by those who were damned by the sins of the flesh.

The Gates of Hell, a monumental portal covered with sculptural relief, was Rodin's first commission from the French government, contracted in 1880. It was meant for the Musée des Arts Décoratifs to be built on the site of what is now the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The delivery date of 1885 passed with the work still unfinished, and in fact *The Gates* was never to be cast in bronze during the sculptor's lifetime. He finished figures from this work in bronze, marble, and terra cotta and sold them as individual sculptures. Thus, *The Gates of Hell* became a major source of the wealth of individual sculptures during the last twenty years of the 19th century.

Rodin's next major commission, *The Burghers of Calais*, was prompted by a policy of raising morale after the Franco-Prussian War by creating public monuments to patriotic Frenchmen. His abandonment of traditional symbols in favor of individual poses and gestures that reveal character were innovations that brought his work into conflict with accepted formulas for public monuments.

Other well-known works by Rodin include monuments to Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. Portraiture was also an important component of Rodin's work, helping him to win acceptance and financial independence. He produced at least 56 portraits between 1877 and his death in 1917, including his companion Camille Claudel, Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, Austrian composer Gustav Mahler, former Argentinian president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and French statesman Georges Clemenceau.

By the 1890s, Rodin's commissions enabled him to employ a number of studio assistants. Although Rodin was himself a skilled marble carver, the later marbles are for the most part products of Rodin's studio, careful renditions of the plaster working models cast from his autograph models in clay.

In 1912, a gallery devoted entirely to his work opened at the Metropolitan Museum. In 1916, Rodin bequeathed his collection to France. It contained his own sculptures, his working models with the casting rights, as well as drawings, paintings, photographs, and documents of various kinds. In return, he required that the French government establish a museum dedicated to his art. The Musée Rodin is now housed in Paris in the eighteenth-century Hôtel Biron that had been the sculptor's studio in the later years of his life.

- **The Object:** The 'Torso of Adèle' was created in 1880 and is named after Rodin's favorite model Adèle Abruzzi. Rodin valued her ability to strike original poses, such as this one. The sculpture shows the upper body as an arc bent backwards. The left arm folded bent backwards and the legs cut at the knee and turned toward the side accentuate the figure's curved and sensual shape. When Rodin removed some of the limbs from his figures, it was to concentrate on the essential and to strengthen their power of expression. Strikingly sensual, "Torso of Adele" pays homage to Michelangelo and Delacroix. Because of its orgastic connotations, it is also interpreted as one of Rodin's most appealing celebrations of female sexuality.

As a plaster cast in the Musée Rodin shows, Rodin must have broken the 'Torso' between navel and abdomen, which allowed him to adjust the degree of twisting by rotating the halves along the metal

armament inside.

There are about ten plasters for this work, which shows how important it was for Rodin. They served as possible starting points for new compositions or a fragment transformed into a fully-fledged work. Later this form was repeated in “Eternal Springtime” and “Fallen Angel”.

- **Commentary:** Rodin was a naturalist, less concerned with monumental expression than with character and emotion. Departing with centuries of tradition, he turned away from the idealism of the Greeks and the decorative beauty of the Baroque movements. His sculpture emphasized the individual and the concreteness of flesh and suggested emotion through detailed, textured surfaces and the interplay of light and shadow. To a greater degree than his contemporaries, Rodin believed that an individual's character was revealed by his physical features. For Rodin, Nature was best represented by the human body, especially the female body. Many of his female figures, like this one, are not meant to represent a particular women: she stand for all women. She represents fertility, gives birth to life, to the whole world.

For Rodin, a single hand, a torso, an unfinished study could contain as much truth and beauty as the complete figure. On occasion, Rodin would break off parts of complete plaster casts to present them as artworks for themselves or use them as material for new assemblages. Whether Rodin’s predilection for the fragment was rooted in his admiration for Michelangelo or constituted a genuine innovative impulse, may remain open to discussion. But undisputedly Rodin propelled this artistic principle more forcefully than any of his contemporaries.

Rodin based his sculptures on spontaneous poses from life, unself-consciously assumed by men and women. He preferred to work with amateur models, street performers, acrobats, strong men, and dancers. In the atelier, his models moved about and took positions without manipulation. Rodin’s method was at odds with the long-honored practice of a model taking and holding a particular pose in the established repertory. He stressed that he could “only work from a model”. His description of Adele: “(She) had that sovereign beauty of which all poets have sung. ... her movements were quick and feline, with the lissomeness and grace of a panther; all the strength and splendor of muscular beauty, and that perfect equilibrium that simplicity of bearing which makes great gesture.” For Rodin, a model was as important as the clay in his hands; through the model came the form. Rodin recognized his models as artistic collaborators.

Other helpful information:

- Great web site re: Rodin: http://www.rodin-web.org/approach_art/default.htm
- Web site with image of Eternal Springtime: [Auguste Rodin: Eternal Spring, also known as Eternal Springtime \(17.120.184\) | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

