In the years following 1900, it became clear that Rodin had changed the terms and expectations for the practice of sculpture and for the persona of the modern sculptor. By his death in 1917, however, there had emerged significant alternatives and deviations from the style he had established.\(^1\)

In an inverse relation to the popularity his work began to accrue with the general public and with wealthy patrons (in particular, American collectors), Rodin’s avant-garde credibility began to wane in the 1910s and 1920s. As Leo Steinberg and others later discussed, the proliferation of marble sculptures clearly not by Rodin’s hand tarnished his reputation as struggling and misunderstood outsider on which his earlier career was based.\(^2\) Rodin’s performative activation of materiality and touch had provided the foundation for the ascendance of such modernist sculptural doctrines as direct carving and truth to material early in the twentieth century.\(^3\) Despite being a catalyst for these developments, however, Rodin came – largely through his twentieth-century marbles – to appear to many as their antithesis. Whereas his handling of clay and plaster established the importance of making sculptural objects and not just sculptural images, the formulaic translation of his touches to marble increasingly came to appear false. For instance, even a more or less non-modernist

sculptor such as Rodin’s British contemporary Hamo Thornycroft could criticize Rodin on the contradictions between the myth of his touch and the ubiquitous marbles. He wrote in one of his sketchbooks in 1920 that

Rodin as a modeller was I think never surpassed, & he knew what form would look right in marble & got men to elaborally [sic] point & carve it – but I believe he never carved himself. His modelling was so complete that it could be copied by skilled Italians in Paris, & the unfinished pieces & bits of the block were purposely left rough, & gave the contrast & enhanced the perfect surface of the finished part, & impressed the ignorant public saying, ‘how wonderful’ ‘his carving is so wonderful’! This wonderful carving continued some time after his death however!

In other words, Rodin’s marbles became the victim of his own success. He had so earnestly established the importance and centrality of his touch as the primary meaning of his works that the marbles (not to mention the other posthumous works) seemed to betray the mythology that surrounded his handling of clay and bronze. Furthermore, Rodin’s chosen subject matter increasingly began to appear overly sentimental and decreasingly “modern.” That is, the depiction of love and passion that had energized Rodin’s practice became, for some, overdetermined and trite, leading many sculptors to abandon it and return to more austere uses of the nude.

Rodin’s most influential contribution, however, came not from his liberated and tortured subject matter or from the way his style seemed to reiterate that purported freedom and expressivity. Rather, Rodin’s fundamental impact came from his reorientation of sculptural practice. By shifting the focus from sculptural image to sculptural object and placing his own performed presence as the mediator, Rodin raised the question of the object-nature of sculpture and its relation to its makers and viewers. This move from image to object and the concomitant activation of the sculptor’s persona both emerged as central questions for subsequent sculptors – regardless of their embrace or disdain for Rodin’s subject mat-

ter or embellished style. Again, such modernist ideals as truth to materials and direct carving are in many ways answers to the questions that Rodin raised with his version of modern sculpture. In short, even as Rodin ceased to be the sculptor to emulate, the issues raised by his art-theoretical tactics continued to be transmitted and responded to in debates about how to make sculpture modern. Since the sexual had become the cornerstone of Rodin’s innovations at the level of making objects and the denominator of meaning for his practice and persona, it


is not surprising that this issue in particular created significant repercussions. In conclusion, I shall briefly suggest two such effects of Rodin’s example: first, the realignment of the possibilities for female modern sculptors and, second, a focused case study of a youthful artist who took on Rodin’s sexualizing of sculptural practice in an effort to be “modern.” These two schematic propositions will serve to indicate the wider, but as yet incompletely understood, impact of Rodin’s sexually grounded version of modern sculptural practice.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the gender of the sculptor repeatedly surfaced as a key issue. The medium itself had long been seen as a masculine endeavor because of the physical exertion purportedly required to produce sculpture, and women were consequently discouraged from practicing it. However, as I discussed in the last chapter, the role of the sculptor in the nineteenth century was supposed to involve not physical exertion but mental conception – form-making rather than object-making. Consequently, a space opened in nineteenth-century sculpture for a substantial number of women artists who exploited this division of labor. Mid-century and subsequent artists such as Harriet Hosmer, Mary Thornycroft, Edmonia Lewis, Emma Stebbins, Marcello, and Camille Claudel all created noteworthy careers despite the sexist stereotype of the sculptor’s identity that was frequently used against them. 6 Rodin himself was an advocate of women’s right to be artists, both in the personal case of Claudel but also more generally in his encouragement of such artists as Jessie Lipscomb, Ottilie McLaren, Kathleen Scott, and Malvina Hoffman. 7 Both in Rodin’s circle and more generally, it was more possible in the nineteenth century than ever before to be a woman sculptor, yet the first decades of the twentieth century again saw a resurgence of an aggressive and restrictive construction of sculpture as physicalized masculine exertion. While women sculptors continued to emerge in significant numbers early in the twentieth century, the contours of modern sculpture were established primarily in relation to male sculptors. In this swing of the pendulum, the visual impact and wide influence of the persona of Rodin that emerged in 1900 seems crucial. As has been discussed exten-
sively in the literature, modern art, in general, became increasingly identified with and defined through masculinity in the early years of the twentieth century. Rodin’s contemporaries such as Paul Cézanne or Pablo Picasso also made the erotic a central component of their versions of modern art but Rodin’s singular and titanic example – with its frequent scandalous associations in the popular media – dominated the understanding of modern sculpture.

Rodin fundamentally altered the terms under which modern sculpture was subsequently developed. By elevating materiality and the objecthood of sculpture and by overturning the dualistic division of conception and execution, Rodin’s practice inadvertently foregrounded the importance of sculpture as a physical, material object resulting from an embodied process of manipulation. In Rodin’s case, this emphasis on materiality was reliant on the gendered rhetoric of the sculptor as virile creator, vividly displayed in the 1900 exhibition. Regardless of whether or not subsequent artists accepted or rejected his style, this interweaving of materiality and masculinity had a profound impact on discourses of the identity of the modernist sculptor across Europe and America. The renewed interest in stone carving, as mentioned, took on Rodin’s emphasis on materiality but broke with his emphasis on clay modelling and reproductive sculptural processes in favor of the immediate confrontation of sculptor and block of stone. With this development, the gendering of the role of the sculptor and of materiality was not lost – by contrast, it was often heightened. In Rodin’s wake, sculpture’s physicality again became a primary issue and making sculpture was increasingly understood as a process tantamount to sexualized creation.

One of Rodin’s close followers and ardent supporters, Malvina Hoffman (1887–1966), provides an example. Hoffman had an extensive and successful career that, in addition to her work, involved writing a number of widely read books on sculpture. In one, she clearly articulated the difficulties that faced the woman sculptor attempting to be a modern sculptor. Writing about the period in the early 1910s after she had met Rodin and devoted herself to becoming a sculptor, she remarked:
It was about this time that I began to realize what a serious handicap it was for a woman to attempt competition with the men in the field of sculpture. There was absolutely no traditional credit given to a woman in this field of activity, and I felt convinced of the necessity of learning my profession from the very beginning, so as to be able to control the workmanship of the great number of craftsmen with whom I was obliged to come into contact, both in France and in America.\(^9\)

Whereas in the nineteenth century, the division of labor in sculptural production allowed for the insulation of the artist from the labor of producing the final object, Hoffman felt the need to attend to the materiality of the object and learn each stage and step. While many sculptors felt the need for a working knowledge of the basics of carving and bronze casting, Hoffman implied that she had to learn more than was expected in order to compete. Rodin himself, she no doubt understood, was not required to have the same knowledge of all processes. Hoffman, by contrast, had to work to overcome the prejudices she faced due to the expectations of the physicality of sculpture in a way that Rodin never had to.

This same differential expectation based on the gender of the sculptor was also confronted, albeit in a more personal way, by Camille Claudel (1864–1943). Her development represents an early confirmation of the difficulty felt by Hoffman. Claudel worked closely and collaborated with Rodin, and their works from especially close moments are often nearly indistinguishable.\(^10\) When Claudel repudiated her personal and professional relationships with Rodin, however, she was required to establish an entirely different mode of practice. The activated surfaces and dramatic subject matter of her earlier work were read as too much like Rodin’s. He had so effectively established the *non-finito* and the rough surface as his touch that other artists working in similar modes seemed, again, merely to refer back to him. Claudel moved away from her earlier, looser mode of handling and began to reinvest in high polish (informed by an emerging Art Nouveau sensibility) and to explore multiple materials, as in the *Gossips* of 1897 or the *Wave* of 1897–1902. These moves away from Rodin’s practice register the meaning of his technique as being all about Rodin


and the signature style and meaning he had so effectively established. His style and technique were, thus, not neutral or natural – which is how his supposedly freer handling of surface is sometimes characterized. Instead, Rodin’s way of making sculpture “modern” was pernicious in always refer-
seen, Rodin was, if anything, more reliant on the labor of others than even his academic predecessors. Of course, I am not implying that there was a level playing field or that women had full access before this to the practice of sculpture. There was, however, in the conventional separation of the intellectual labor of form-making from the physical labor of object-making the possibility to circumvent the long-standing prejudice against women as object-makers based on the assumptions about the demands of physical labor. In the nineteenth century the range of women sculptors increased in response to this opportunity, yet this growth was inhibited as Rodin’s gendered and sexualized version of modern sculpture took the lead around 1900.

Beyond Rodin’s impact on the gendering of the persona of the modern sculptor, his example also disseminated the issues of gender and sexuality into sculptural practice. That is, the patterns that Rodin put into place with regard to the sculptural material being the gendered counterpart to the virile sculptor were transmitted to the succeeding generation as they looked to emulate or diverge from Rodin’s titanic example. To discuss this, I shall briefly examine one exemplary case, that of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915). The young French-born sculptor felt an early passion for Rodin’s work and methods and took him as his prototype. Intense, precocious, and impetuous, Gaudier achieved a good deal of notoriety before he died in combat at the age of twenty-three, and it is the shifting enthusiasms and lack of perspective that his youth affords which are helpful in thinking through the impact of an iconic forebear like Rodin.

From the time the eighteen-year-old Gaudier arrived in Paris late in 1909, he began to adopt a reverential attitude toward Rodin. For instance, writing in a letter on New Year’s Day 1910, he declared: “We shall never see a greater sculptor than Rodin [. . .] Rodin is for France what Michelangelo was for Florence, he will have imitators but never rivals.” Over the following years, Gaudier continued to use Rodin as his touchstone and his letters are littered with praise and critical engagement with Rodin’s sculpture and his writings. For instance, in a letter to his partner Zofia (Sophie) Brzeska in 1912, he spent five pages summarizing
Again, Rilke is a central source: “Rodin had the theory that if insignificant movements of the model, when he believed himself to be unobserved, were caught rapidly, they would give a vividness of expression of which we have no idea because we are not accustomed to follow them with keen, alert attention.” Rilke, “Rodin-Book: First Part,” 114.

This was discussed at length in Wagner, “Rodin’s Reputation,” 191–242.


CONCLUSION

1 This was charted well by the 2009 exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay, Oublier Rodin? La sculpture à Paris, 1905–1914.


4 Thornycroft was a key player in the British alternative to Rodin’s development of modern sculpture but in the twentieth century became less sympathetic to the ways in which his own innovations were built on by self-identified modernist sculptors. For a brief discussion of this shift see David Getsy, “William Hamo Thornycroft (1850–1925),” in Sculpture in twentieth-Century Britain, ed. Penelope Curtis et al. (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003), 316–9.

5 Hamo Thornycroft, journal entry for January 7, 1920, Thornycroft Papers, Henry Moore Institute Archive, Leeds, Sketchbook Tii–S. Similarly, Paul Gsell, co-author of Rodin’s widely read dialogues on art, wrote that same year, “By drawing, Rodin gratified a need. As soon as he was installed at the Hôtel Biron, he practically had no other occupation. He hardly sculpted any more. He contented himself by superintending the figure-carvers, who, under his eyes, carved little groups in marble from the models he had formerly made.” Paul Gsell, “Drawings by Rodin,” in Twelve Aquarelles by Auguste Rodin, trans. Ronald Davis (Geneva and Paris: Georg Editions, 1920), 7.


12 The importance of Rodin is often cited in the literature on Gaudier. See, e.g., Evelyn Silber, *Gaudier-Brzeska: Life and Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); Sebastiano Barassi, “A Pioneer of Avant-Garde Sculpture,” in “We the Moderns”: *Gaudier-Brzeska and the Birth of Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: Kettle’s Yard, 2007), 8–59. In addition to sketches after Rodin’s *Thinker and St. John the Baptist Preaching*, there is a pair of satirical drawings (Kettle’s Yard) from July 1909 when Gaudier was in Munich that refer to Rodin. Both represent works by and have reverential citations to the French sculptor. See Barassi, “A Pioneer,” 8–9.

13 Gaudier to Dr Uhlemayr, January 1, 1910, trans. in H. S. Ede, *Savage Messiah* (1931; London: Abacus, 1972), 19. Gaudier was in Paris at this point and writing to the head of the household in Nuremberg at which he had lodged in 1909.

14 “Tous nos suffrages pour Rodin, n’est-ce pas [?]” Gaudier to Sophie Brzeska, November 3, 1912, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska Papers, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex. Trans. in part in ibid., 107, as “All our sympathies are with Rodin, are they not[?]” Ede reprints much of the letter but not the five-page précis, which focuses on Rodin’s discussions of ‘character’ as central to art. For the text Gaudier discusses, see Auguste Rodin and Paul Gsell, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, trans. J. de Caso and P. Sanders (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14–21.