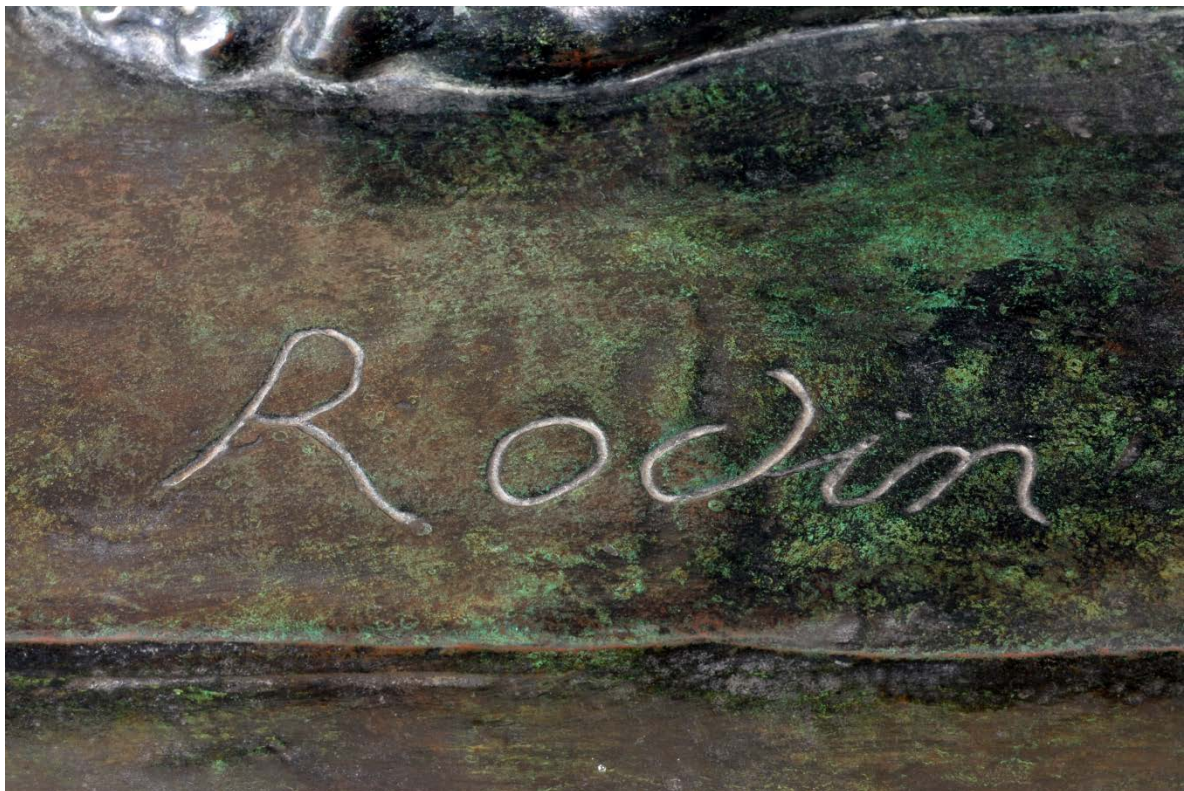
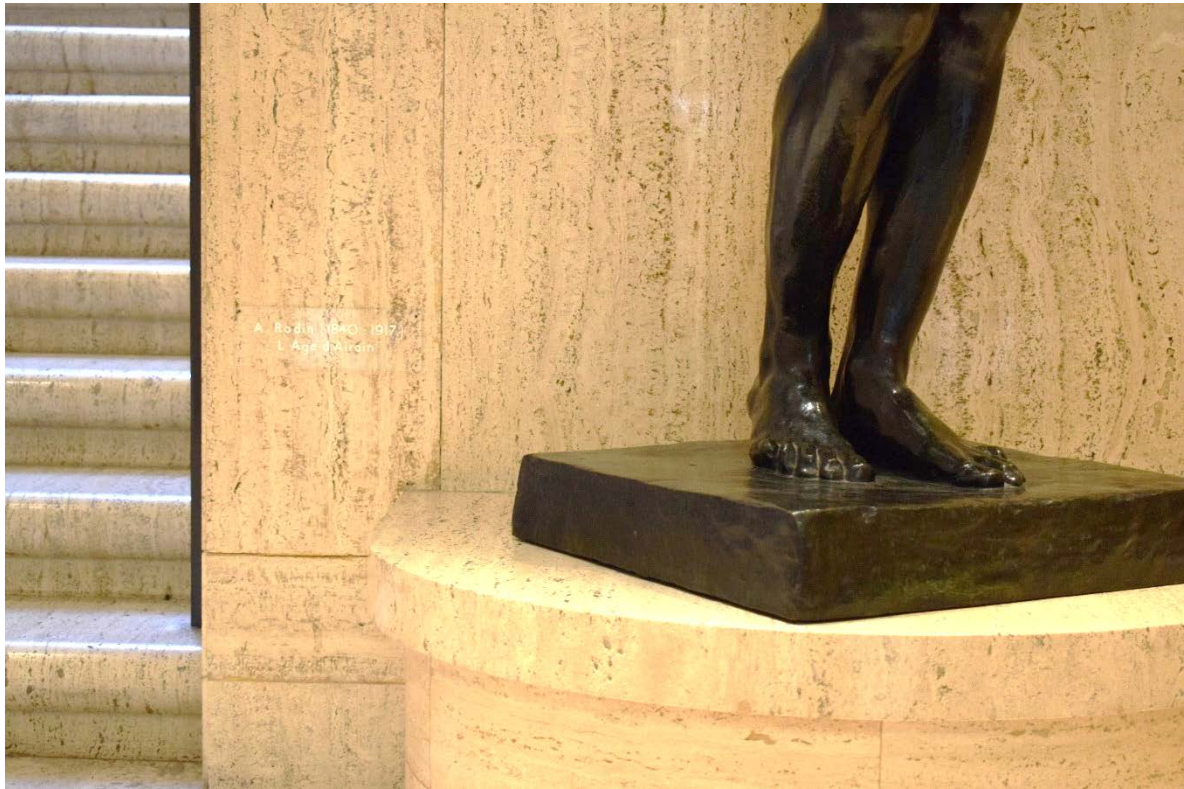


# Rodin



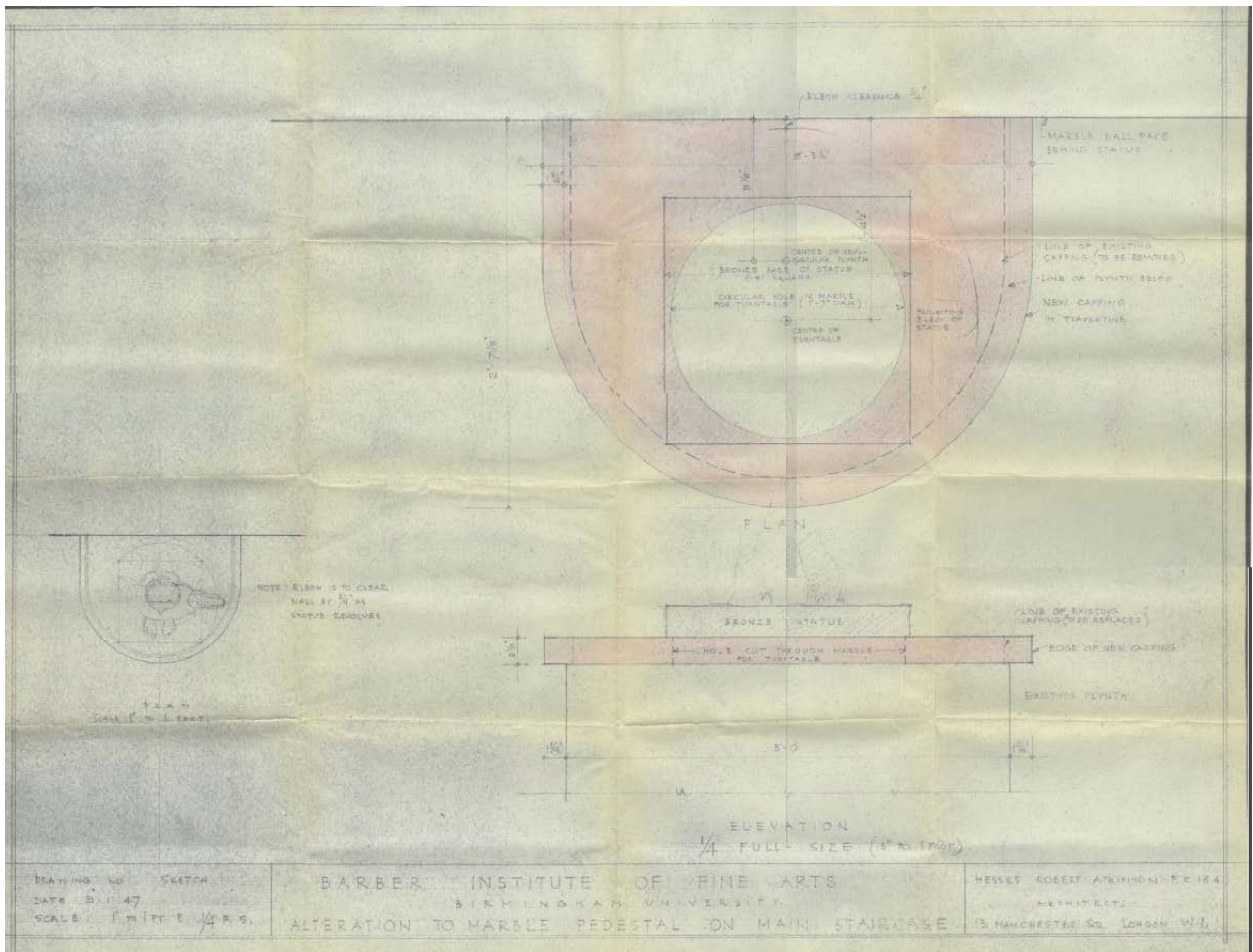
*The Age of Bronze*, Auguste Rodin, about 1887, bronze, 180.5 x 68.5 x 54.5cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.





Details of the Barber's Rodin plinth by the main staircase. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.





Robert Atkinson's working drawing for the Barber's Rodin plinth, 1947, pencil on paper, 49 x 62cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

## Transcript

Welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. I'm Helen Cobby, the Assistant Curator, and today I'd like to talk about one of the sculptures that I used to walk past almost every day when going about my work at the Barber Institute - a life-size cast of Auguste Rodin's once highly provocative male nude, *The Age of Bronze*. I wanted to talk about this sculpture today not only because I really miss this rather unusual opportunity to see such a piece of art all the time, as I've mostly been working from home during this pandemic, but also because this Thursday, the 12th November, it would be Rodin's birthday. He would be 180 years old. So, to celebrate, we will look together at the circumstances in which this sculpture joined the Barber's collection, and use a little-known architectural drawing of the sculpture's plinth from the Barber archives to consider how its display impacts upon its possible interpretations.

When you enter the Barber Institute and look towards the stairs leading to the first floor galleries, you will not help but notice this rather proud male nude positioned by the stairway at the end of the foyer. Rodin's sculpture *The Age of Bronze*, first exhibited in 1877 as a plaster model, was initially considered highly provocative by critics but ultimately launched his successful career. It has earned its place as one of his most famous sculptures, along with *The Thinker* (bronze, 1904) and *The Kiss* (marble, 1882). However, *The Age of Bronze* appears particularly naturalistic in its portrayal of a nude young man and this realism does not seem typical of Rodin's oeuvre. He rarely chose to sculpt life-like figures, valuing dynamic, expressive and even fragmented parts of bodies over anatomical correctness.

Yet here the figure's right leg is bent in a traditional *contrapposto* pose where the man appears to stand with his weight on one leg, which causes the hips and shoulders to rest at opposite angles and thereby convey a sense of dynamism. *Contrapposto* was first used - and used extensively - in ancient Greek sculpture from the mid to late fifth-century BC, and was extremely important in the development of sculptural practice. The use of such a pose for *The Age of Bronze* emphasises not only Rodin's indebtedness to classical sculpture, but also his fascination with conveying

expressive movement, contained here within the figure's moment of awakening. It certainly helps to communicate, albeit subtly, the tensions and changes experienced by the figure as it moves from resting to awakening, perhaps in both body and mind.

The pose of the figure's hands adds to this suggestion of movement and growth into a conscious being. The right hand is placed on the crown of his head and so helps to guide the viewer's eyes to the young man's head, the centre of thoughts and feelings, which is roughly framed by his fists. The left hand, raised above shoulder height, was originally conceived as holding a long spear, but Rodin quickly removed this to aid the ambiguous nature of the pose. His success at conveying expression and movement is regarded as among his greatest achievements; it is often most successful and haunting in his independent sculptures of hands.

The artist's own hands - and by extension, the visible marks of his touch on his work - have also attracted great attention from collectors and academics. Much has been made of his unique mark making, including finger prints and textured surfaces, in terms of the originality of the sculptures, his working methods and even what has been perceived as his erotic craftsmanship and its links to his infamous affairs. There is some irony here, as, by nature, the bronze sculptures are translations of Rodin's original clay and plaster casts by craftsmen working in foundries - he hadn't directly touched these himself. Needless to say, these ideas have gathered many myths along the way, some of which are perhaps both tackled and perpetuated in Professor David Gettsy's book *Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* from 2010.

*The Age of Bronze* is Rodin's earliest full-length sculpture to have survived in the form of later bronze casts of the original plaster model. He was struggling to be recognised as an artist while he was making the model over a period of 18 months from 1875 in Belgium, where he had moved from Paris following the Franco-Prussian War. He first exhibited the sculpture as a plaster at the *Cercle Artistique* in Brussels in 1877, under the title *The Conquered Man*. It has also been known as *The Awakening Man* or *The Vanquished One*, the latter perhaps explains the spear and references France's painful defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The sculpture seems to depict an ambiguous moment of human awakening. Is the awakening to pain or joy, or perhaps it is not so clear cut?

Shortly after being shown in Brussels, the work, still in plaster, was first exhibited with the title *The Age of Bronze* at the Salon of the *Société des Artistes Français* in Paris. The title now referred to a period in mankind's development. It may also explain why, when purchased for the Barber, it was considered an appropriate point of transition from the mostly ancient medieval items in the gallery's foyer to the post-medieval works in the galleries above. The figure spirals upwards just like the stairs, leading us to an awakened and advanced place.

When Rodin first displayed the sculpture at the Paris Salon, it caused a great scandal due to the very life-like appearance of the figure; critics accused Rodin of using a life cast of his sitter, a young Belgian soldier called Auguste Neyt. Traditional French sculpture was usually based on historical or mythological subjects with particular, coded poses that were relatively easy to read. So the sculpture's ambiguous pose and Rodin's concentration on the aesthetic form of Neyt's body also grated with the artistic circles of the time. Rodin was appalled by the criticism, and appealed to friends, fellow artists, writers, and members of the jury of the Fine Arts Exposition at the Paris Salon. He was especially intent on proving that the realism of his work was a product of intense study, and asked a prolific photographer of nudes, Gaudenzio Marconi, to take photographs of Neyt naked in the pose of the sculpture. This was wasted energy, because for some reason the jury never looked at these images.

The scandal inadvertently raised Rodin's profile both in France and internationally, he received great support from fellow artists and Salon officials were eventually convinced of his integrity. With his name cleared, Rodin was able to exhibit the work in bronze in 1880 at the Paris Salon, the city's prestigious annual contemporary art exhibition. The first cast of *The Age of Bronze* was made by Thiébaud Frères in May that year, at the instruction of the head of the Salon's fine arts administration. The French Ministry of Fine Arts purchased this first bronze and in 1884 had it displayed in the Luxembourg Gardens, Paris; it is now in the Musée d'Orsay. This was the first grand-scale purchase of Rodin's work, and marked a turning point in his career; he was now widely accepted as a respected professional artist.

More than fifty bronze casts of *The Age of Bronze* were made to Rodin's specifications, both at the size of the original plaster and smaller in scale.

Six are now in public UK collections; the earliest of these, cast in 1905, is at Leeds City Art Gallery. The Barber's example is one of the full-scale versions. It was cast in the foundry of Alexis Rudier in Paris before 1917; the foundry's mark can be seen on the base of the work. Rudier became the principal foundry for Rodin's bronzes from 1902 onwards, and his exclusive foundry from 1913 until his death in 1917. It was later appointed the official bronze founder of the Musée Rodin in Paris, which opened two years after Rodin died, in 1919. Rodin gave the Museum the rights to make and sell casts from his models, to provide income to run the place, and so, evidently, he was happy for 'Rodins' to proliferate. The other mark on this work is Rodin's flourish of a signature, which is clearly visible on the top of the bronze base, next to the figure's left foot.

The Barber Institute's first director, Thomas Bodkin, purchased the sculpture at the Christie's sale of Lady Mary Davis's effects on 27 March 1942, for £273 (this is roughly equivalent to £14,500 today). It had been in the collection of Sir Edmund and Lady Davis at Chilham Castle in Kent, and it is thought that Sir Edmund had purchased it directly from Rodin himself. He was one of the artist's greatest English collectors and patrons. Six other sculptures by the artist were also for sale in this lot (no. 130), including the bronze figures *Eve* and a reduced version of *The Burghers of Calais*. *The Age of Bronze* was arguably the most widely known of the Rodin works at this sale, perhaps making it an obvious choice for Bodkin. Although the Barber Institute archives have no first-hand evidence from Bodkin to explain his specific reasons for the acquisition, it does fit snugly with the collecting policy drawn up in 1932 by the gallery's founder, Lady Barber. Here she stated that the collection should be 'of that standard of quality required by the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection' in London. She also stipulated that no works made later than 1899 should be acquired, at the time making Rodin's sculpture one of the most modern pieces in the collection. It made the cut, because although it is a post-1900 cast, it was first conceived by Rodin in the late 1870s. Fortunately, this rule has now been modified, so the collection can continue to evolve and later works can be acquired, providing they were made at least 30 years ago.

Rodin's reputation in the 1940s, at the time of Bodkin's purchase, was arguably not as strong as it had been when he was alive and was actually in decline for much of the 1930s and 40s. This was perhaps partly because



of the reaction against his subjective technique and expressive subject matter by younger artists and critics. It may have made the work more affordable for Bodkin.

After arriving at the Barber, the sculpture was exhibited in the entrance hall next to the steps leading up to the art galleries and it has remained there ever since. This followed Bodkin's wish to acquire sculptures to provide a grand processional route to the galleries. It was displayed on a bespoke marble plinth, which had been reserved for a sculpture - originally the idea being a classical marble. The plinth remains a striking architectural feature, seamlessly joining onto the marble wall behind it and to the steps leading up to the art galleries. It was soon altered to enable it to rotate and display the sculpture from different angles.

Robert Atkinson, who had designed the Barber building in 1932, made the plans for the rotating plinth. His working drawing, dated 9 January 1947 and now in the Barber's archives, presents a bird's eye view of the new plinth and designs in cross section. These reveal how the square bronze base of the sculpture sits on a circular turntable embedded within a new slab of marble (marked in a red wash in the drawing) that follows the original semi-oval shape of the plinth, but also adds a lip over the original edges so as to hide the new mechanism. From looking at this subtle addition, one might never know that the plinth was designed to be rotated. Atkinson's drawing also shows where the marble is cut through on the new covering in order for the sculpture to rotate safely. Several notes point out that there is just sufficient elbow clearance (of 1.9 cm) for the sculpture at all points in the rotation, certainly something to be mindful of as the work is positioned close to the wall. A ghostly elbow is even drawn into the main bird's-eye-view plan towards the top right of the sheet.

As the sculpture is positioned near the wall, visitors are unable to walk all the way round it. However, periodically, curatorial staff rotate the plinth, giving visitors the chance to see it from different angles. There is often no right or dominant angle at which to view Rodin's work in general. In fact, different meanings may even emerge from different viewing angles. *The Age of Bronze* appears vulnerable, and even 'flat' and static, when viewed straight on. It is when the figure is seen from the side or at an oblique angle that it appears to really come alive. The decision to have bespoke



rotating plinths is particularly appropriate for this work, because by offering different viewing angles, the display method enhances, and even celebrates, the multiplicity and ambiguity inherent in Rodin's figure.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these weekly talks. We have another talk next week and would be delighted if you wanted to join us then.

### Select Reading List

Butler, Ruth. *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.

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Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. MA and London: MIT Press, 1986.

Mitchell, Claudine (ed.). *Rodin: The Zola of Sculpture*. Farnham: Routledge, 2004.

Wenley, Robert. 'In the Round' in *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts: Foundations of a Collection*. London: Scala, 2012.

## **Speaker info**

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the Spring 2020 exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

**Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.**