

Rodin brought sculpture into the 20th century. He delved into human emotions to create figures that seem to emerge from captivity in another place or time. text PHILIPPA ANDERSON

# THE CUTTING EDGE

## expressions

Seeing *The Kiss* in the flesh (so to speak) is the only way to appreciate the skill of its creator. Along with icons such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo's *David*, the overwhelming popularity and mass reproduction of *The Kiss* by Rodin in some ways give it a familiar feel. But this reduces its true brilliance.

Stand close to the two-metre tall marble version, commissioned in 1904, and the warmth and intensity of emotions — passion, sensuality and tenderness — that emanate from the cold stone is extraordinary. So erotic is the portrayal of two lovers that when this piece was shown in England in the early 20th century, protesters succeeded in getting it covered with a cloth. Even in the 1950s, when it was bought by London's Tate gallery, there was an outcry.

*The Kiss*, along with many of Rodin's pieces, started out as part of a large commission, *Gates of Hell*. But it soon took on a life of its own. In fact, so deeply did the creator identify with his figures that Rodin even claimed love at first sight. "For the first time, I saw separate pieces, arms, heads or feet, then I attempted the figure as a whole. Suddenly, I grasped what unity was ... I was in ecstasy ..."

### FLESH AND BLOOD

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), the French sculptor heralded the modern age. He drew inspiration from Italian masters, particularly Michelangelo and Donatello. Breaking with traditional classical sculpting methods, Rodin often used clay models from which a plaster copy would be taken and then after much experimentation a bronze cast would be made. After his death, his works continued to be editioned and today, Rodin pieces in marble, terracotta, bronze and plaster grace art galleries around the globe.

*The Kiss* and *The Thinker* are his best-known and most-copied pieces. Both are unforgettable. The latter captures a man in deep contem-

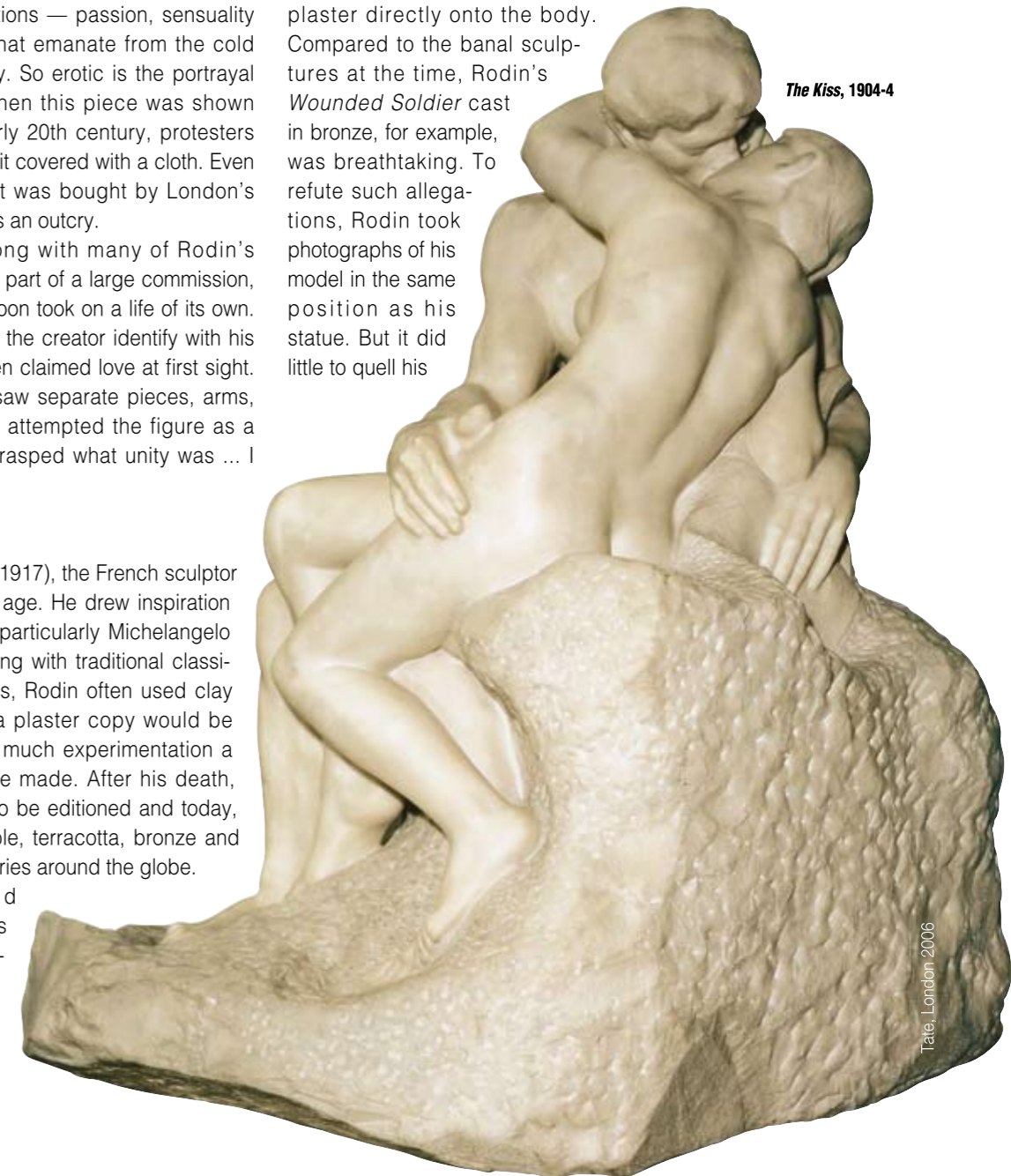
plation. What distinguishes this piece from similar pieces by his predecessors is that Rodin has captured the very effort of thought in every muscle of the man's body — from the furrowed brow to the tension in his back and legs.

"The body is a cast on which passions are imprinted," Rodin said. And in every piece he portrayed the character's depth of emotion.

Many of his pieces were so lifelike that Rodin was accused of moulding the plaster directly onto the body.

Compared to the banal sculptures at the time, Rodin's *Wounded Soldier* cast in bronze, for example, was breathtaking. To refute such allegations, Rodin took photographs of his model in the same position as his statue. But it did little to quell his

*The Kiss*, 1904-4





*Leaning nude woman from behind, arms folded*

critics as the figure was still disturbingly real. The following year, to counter his accusers he made his next piece larger than life. The model for *St John the Baptist* was “a robust peasant” who took up a suitable stance to provide the movement for the composition.

Realism came through when he created the large work *The Burghers of Calais*, to commemorate the six men prepared to give up their lives in the 14th century to save the French town. Rodin admitted to creating his figures nude and then clothing them. “I have only to throw a drapery over them and everything comes alive where it touches; it is no cold effigy, but flesh and blood.” Like many of his large public sculptures — including that of Balzac and Victor Hugo — it was greeted by vilification but Rodin persevered in trying to get people to understand his work. This piece still stands in Calais and 12 casts were taken of the work, one of which stands in the garden of England’s House of Parliament.

**FROM HEROISM TO DESPAIR**

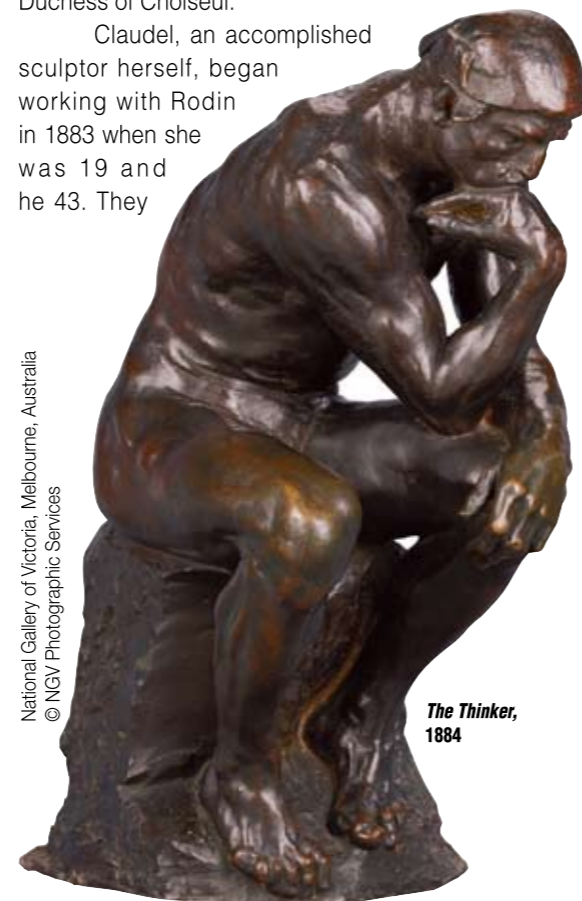
In the massive *Burghers of Calais* composition the attention to detail is incredible from the hands to the ropes around the necks. Rodin worked with

the same artistic finesse and freedom in these monumental commissioned sculptures as he did in smaller simpler pieces such as *The Cathedral* which shows two hands, symbolising a lover’s union.

Critics have accused Rodin of being obsessed with women, but it was more that he was obsessed by art and saw the female form simply as a shape and object of beauty. When he portrays women, passion is evident in many of his pieces but so is a whole gamut of other emotions — from heroism to despair. Despite the often immodest poses, he had no problem finding models for the many sketches and moulds of the female form.

His long-time companion was Rose Beuret. They were partners for 56 years and he finally married her just two weeks before she died. But during all those years Rodin had many lovers, most notably his pupil and fellow sculptor Camille Claudel, and the artist Gwen John and the Duchess of Choiseul.

Claudel, an accomplished sculptor herself, began working with Rodin in 1883 when she was 19 and he 43. They



*The Thinker, 1884*

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia  
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soon developed a creative and intimate bond. She was his lover and muse for some 15 years — she even claimed later that Rodin copied some of her work. Beautiful and strong-willed, she fascinated Rodin and was his model for many of the damned figures on the original *Gates of Hell*, including *The Kiss*. In some ways this was prophetic as Claudel spent the last 30 years of her life in a mental asylum, abandoned by her mentor and family.

Rodin once said: “I’ve always tried to render inner feelings through the mobility of muscles ... Without life, art does not exist.” Certainly when you see his work up close, you have a sense that this great French artist was trying to capture not just a representation of a man’s or woman’s body but their very soul. ▲

**CREATIVE GENIUS**

Rodin drew inspiration from Renaissance sculptors like Michelangelo and went on to stimulate creativity in countless artists who followed in his footsteps — from Gustav Klimt to George Segal.

Born in Paris in 1840, Rodin studied in the Petite Ecole, a school for those planning a career in the decorative arts. Despite being rejected three times from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he persevered and began working as an assistant to other sculptors. During the 1880s, his career began to flourish with public bodies in France commissioning a number of high-profile monuments.

One of these was the *Gates of Hell* which was never completed, but many of his best known works — including *The Kiss* and *The Thinker* were originally smaller parts of the massive artwork.

**“THE BODY IS A CAST ON WHICH PASSIONS ARE IMPRINTED.” — AUGUSTE RODIN (1840-1917)**



*Gates of Hell, c. 1890*

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