

THE RODIN ROOM



*The mission of art
is not to copy nature,
but to express it !*

Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*.

At the end of the 19th century, the 'Société des Gens de Lettres' (Society of Men of Letters of France) commissioned Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) to create a sculpture in honour of Honoré de Balzac. This room traces the history and context of the development of this masterpiece of modern art via a selection of studies of sculptors from the late 19th century and several works by Auguste Rodin.

I. Early projects

In the years immediately following the death of Honoré de Balzac (1850), a monument was envisaged in his honour : the Parisian literary elite was shocked that his widow was not maintaining his modest tomb and Alexandre Dumas started a fund for a sculpture. At the same time, Madame Ève de Balzac had the bronze bust of Balzac by David d'Angers erected on his tombstone, and a disappointed Dumas closed the fund. All initiatives for a memorial for the great novelist were thus blocked until the death of his widow. With time, the idea of a monument faded : Balzac was no longer in fashion.

But in the late 1870s, as Paris transformed itself and statues "sprang up" all over its boulevards, Émile Zola began a campaign to rehabilitate the author of *The Human Comedy*. In 1888, the *Société des Gens de Lettres* organised a competition to erect a statue in memory of Balzac. Henri Chapu was nominated, but he died shortly afterwards. Following a new selection of sculptors, on 6 July 1891 the commission was awarded to Auguste Rodin, supported by the new president of the *Société des Gens de Lettres*, Émile Zola.

Émile Zola Defender of Balzac's memory

Balzac died in August 1850. And ungrateful Paris, at a time when statues are springing up overnight on every pavement like mushrooms, has not yet thought to commemorate the great writer of this century, one of France's most famous children. Not even a bust on one of our miserable fountains, not even a marble plaque to commemorate a single date in his life. We have donated a road to him, and nothing more.

Émile Zola, *Le Figaro*,
6 December 1880.

ANATOLE MARQUET DE VASSELLOT

Another sculptor, Anatole Marquet de Vasselot (1840-1904), participated in two competitions organised by the *Société des Gens de Lettres* in 1888 and 1891. In 1868, he began his initial research on Balzac, wanting to become known as the great writer's sculptor. His works display a fairly classical approach, as shown by the terracotta statuette and marble bust shown here : Balzac is standing in a monk's habit. His *Balzac en sphinx* was more original but was ridiculed at the 1896 *Salon* exhibition. His frieze of *The Human Comedy*, displayed on the chimney breast, is a study for a plinth.



MUSÉE BALZAC
Château de Saché

II. Rodin's research and sources

Auguste Rodin tended to research his subjects in order to move closer to reality. He thus met all those who had been close to the great writer, in particular Anna and Georges Mniszech, Balzac's stepdaughter and son-in-law. He also met Charles Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, an avid Balzac collector, who showed him all known existing painted, lithographic and engraved portraits. In the face of this multitude of sources, Rodin alighted on the bust by David d'Angers and, especially, on the daguerreotype owned by Nadar. Furthermore, due to his belief of people being 'impregnated' with their land of origin, in the autumn of 1891 Rodin came to Balzac's Touraine. In Azay-Le-Rideau, he was told that the car valet Mr. Estager resembled Balzac. Rodin thus took him as a model for a whole series of research. During his visit he stayed with Camille Claudel at Château de l'Islette on the banks of the Indre, close to Azay-le-Rideau.

Besides the fact that I generally design quite slowly, I do not want to begin anything before gathering as many documents as possible on Balzac. For me, Balzac is above all a creator, and it is this idea that I wish to make understood in my statue.

Auguste Rodin
to a journalist from the
Moniteur des Arts
in July 1891.

III. The slow development of a masterpiece

The masterpiece endured a long and difficult gestation : it took almost seven years for Rodin to complete his work. In the interests of creating realistic sculptures, Rodin always sculpted his subjects nude before clothing them. The magnificent study in plaster presented here, known as *Étude de nu C*, was completed in Touraine at Château de l'Islette. Around October 1893, he developed this study using further research to create *Balzac, torso dressed in monk's habit, with smiling face*, with the left hand held behind the back.

Throughout the creation of his *Balzac*, Rodin rethought the way in which he viewed the sculpture. He realised that there was not one single depiction of Balzac but thousands, and that he should not be seeking physical resemblance but immortalising in stone his idea of Balzac : a man clothed in a monk's habit, symbolising the writer's monastic life, whose motto was *Day and night*. After crafting a dressing gown in plaster, Rodin trapped his inspiration within his own internal existence. He made his hands disappear. Balzac did not work, he dominated society. To accentuate this domination, the curve of his spine is exaggerated. The work was not to portray a short, fat, self-assured man, but a being shackled by torment... And the head was to be misshapen, to better unite the diversity of representations of Balzac.

I have applied a recent discovery of mine. I have understood that art should not be limited to the contours of the piece of work but, around the person being represented, it should enable a glimpse of the milieu in which the subject lives and enable the imagination like a halo of ideas that explain the subject's character...

Auguste Rodin

IV. The destiny of Rodin's *Balzac*

The statue was presented at the exhibition of the French National Society for Fine Arts in 1898: it met with laughter ; it was too avant-garde, and was misunderstood. Confronted with a press outcry, the *Société des Gens de Lettres* rejected the sculpture and commissioned a new piece. Marquet de Vasselot refused to replace Rodin on the basis of his scruples, and Alexandre Falguière was instead asked to create a classical memorial: Balzac was depicted seated and robed. The unveiling of this piece on the corner of Rue Balzac and Avenue Friedland in Paris did not take place until 23 November 1902, shortly after the sculptor's death.

Hurt but knowing that he had created a major work, Rodin kept his sculpture in his workshop at Meudon until his death in 1917. It would not be recognised as a masterpiece of French art until the 1930s. The first bronze of Balzac by Rodin was cast in 1931 for the museum of Antwerp. In 1936, a copy was smelted for the Rodin museum in Paris. A third bronze was placed at the crossing of Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris, where it can still be seen today. It was unveiled on 1st July 1939, forty-two years after its rejection by the *Société des Gens de Lettres*.

Rodin is the greatest artist of our time - and one of the greatest artists of all time. This man of thought and of work, whose mask of straight lines offers a striking blend of determination and gentleness, is above the judgement of the masses. He is great, even when he errs. Has he got it wrong this time ? We will find out in thirty years, maybe even sooner.

Aurélien Scholl
in *L'Echo de Paris*,
20 May 1898.