

**This photo is available in the print version of  
Heaven and Hell.**

Though Auguste Rodin struggled over twenty years to express through sculpture the desperation of souls that are falling from Grace, he never finished his magnificent obsession.

*Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), THE GATES OF HELL, 1880-1900, Bronze, 250-3/4 x 158 x 33-3/8 in. Posthumous cast authorized by Musée Rodin, 1981. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University; gift of the B. Gerald Cantor Collection. Photograph by Frank Wing.*

# Falling

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Auguste Rodin accepted his first major commission, *The Gates of Hell*, when he was forty years old. This sculpture was to be the doorway for the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Though the museum of decorative arts was not built, Rodin struggled over twenty years to depict the damned as they approach the entrance into hell. He never finished. The sculpture was cast in bronze after the artist's death, using plaster casts taken from his clay models.

*The Gates of Hell*, like Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, lays out its meaning through a turbulent and multi-figured design. The identities of many figures in the composition are not immediately apparent. Instead Rodin challenges us to make sense of the whole work by dissecting its elements and recalling its artistic influences.<sup>†</sup>

*The Three Shades* at the very top, for example, derives from Greek thought about Hades. The figures represent the shadowy, dead persons who gradually fade from existence as they are forgotten by the living. Each is presented without a right hand, her creative hand; in this way Rodin symbolizes the powerlessness of the dead.

*Ugolino and his Sons* on the lower left side of the door, and *Paolo and Francesca*, also on the left, are characters from Dante's powerful poem, *Inferno*. Unlike Dante's story, however, Rodin gives no heaven or purgatory for these figures--only hell. They writhe and grab each other in desperation as they try to prevent their inevitable destruction.

Rodin created *The Gates of Hell* in the tradition of the Renaissance master Lorenzo Ghiberti, whose bronze doors adorn the Florentine Baptistery. Ghiberti's doors, which Michelangelo nicknamed the "Gates of Paradise," were the focus of Rodin's visit to Florence in 1875-76. While there, he also studied the sculpture of Michelangelo. The muscular and sullen forms in Michelangelo's work influenced Rodin in the most copied parts of this sculpture, including *The Thinker*, as he has come to be known. Intended to be the figure of Dante, sitting with his right arm on the left knee in deep contemplation, *The Thinker* is the dominant visual focal point of *The Gates of Hell*.

The sculpture is divided into three compositional areas: the two doors and the tympanum, or horizontal area above them. The tympanum reveals

the damned, on the right, as a sea of arms, legs, faces, skulls, and twisted torsos. The helplessness of these judged souls is powerful and complicated. (The left side remains more of a mystery to interpreters. A kneeling faun holds a body above her head, perhaps on its way to join the damned on the other side.) Although Rodin does not inscribe above his doors the famous quote from Dante, “Abandon every hope, who enter here,” these figures in the tympanum graphically embody that sentiment.

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*Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), THE GATES OF HELL, detail of the tympanum.*

The doors portray a blend of mythological figures (centaurs, fauns), biblical personages (John the Baptist, a martyr), and everyday characters (*The Helmet-maker's Wife*, a crouching woman, a crying girl, a young mother).

*The Gates of Hell* displays human suffering in images drawn from the Bible, literature, and the artist's personal experiences. Even though in his culture, and our own, many people say that reason is incompatible with belief, Rodin invites us to approach these gates through personal introspection as symbolized by the timeless figure of *The Thinker*. Like Michelangelo over 400 years earlier, the sculptor warns us how difficult and confusing it is to envision the desperation of souls that are falling from grace.

#### NOTE

† John L. Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin* (Philadelphia: David R. Godine and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), 89-129. See also Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin's Gates of Hell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960).