
A Degenerate Work of Art: "The Helmet-Maker's Wife" by Auguste Rodin

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Well, here is "a dead one."

Ah, George! What a jubilant soul you must have had when your eyes gazed on this in the Paris Salon! Did you not, in your childish overworship of mere craftsmanship say in substance, in that Barnumesque effusion of yours: "The Confessions of a Young Man" that Ideas in Poetry or Art are a Pest, and that a work of art built around a Subject, having an *idea* as a base, was a dead one? Well, this statue, being a fine piece of craftsmanship, but sans Beauty, sans Poetry, sans Subject and sans Idea must be up to your ideal—and it is dead art.

When this life-sized statue, called a "Danubian Peasant" was exhibited in the Paris Salon, some eight years ago, many said: "What does he mean by it?" This question will stand as long as the statue stands.

This is an absolutely trivial work, and a vicious waste of good marble. Why?

Because, as a subject it is mockingly meaningless. For it is not a typical peasant from anywhere, hence has no significance. If it represents some poor runt of a peasant found somewhere in Hungary, why represent him at all, and in an attitude that is about as imbecile as can be imagined? Had the sculptor called it "A begging Cave Man" it might possibly pass. But even then—why do it? What

did he mean by it? Why ask the busy public to look at it?

It is childish in conception, expresses nothing and is ugly in composition of line and silhouette. In short, vulgar!

The truth is, the sculptor aimed only to make a "sensation" in the Salon—to call attention to himself and advertise his skill—as a clever craftsman, capable of "copying" with extraordinary fidelity. For, as a piece of technical work it is of a high order. The man is well "constructed," the movement is true and every wrinkle of skin and every vein on the body, every bone and muscle is modeled with mechanical exactitude and patiently carved—which is so pleasing to children, peasants from the backwoods, and beginners in sculpture.

But it is totally devoid of any idea, of worthy style, of poetry, of beauty and so only encumbers the earth, in spite of its really striking qualities of good workmanship—which never will take it out of the class of Trivial Art, and out of that class of works more or less charlatanistic—because made to astonish the peasants and that part of the public which does not know that the modeling of a roll of skin under a knee-cap is far less difficult than the composition of a beautiful pattern or the expression of an emotion on a face.

It is not immoral, but it is commonplace, mechanical and meaningless, hence hopelessly trivial.

A DEGENERATE WORK OF ART

"THE HELMET-MAKER'S WIFE"

By AUGUSTE RODIN

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WHEN anything strikes a Parisian as being stupidly funny and excessive he says with an ineffable smile: *C'est à rire!* It is to laugh!

And as one follows the flowering of a newspaper penny-a-liner and café loafer of Paris into a full blooming Modern art critic writing a book, and reads the stuff he ladles out as æsthetic wisdom, we can truly say with the darkey: "It sho' am ter laugh!"

Gentle readers look at the illustration on page 124, and then read the following by Frederick Lawton in his book on Rodin:

"As forming a link between the two decades, may be mentioned two productions, both figures of old women, which were finished rather before 1890, but were exhibited then, and which are undoubtedly conceived in a maturer manner, with rather less movement and rather more sculptural expression. One of these statuettes is to-day in the Luxembourg. A question naturally occurring to the mind, as one gazes at it, is who could have been the model for the 'Vieille Heaulmière,' or more properly 'Celle qui fut heaulmière?' The answer is: An old Italian widow, very old, very poverty stricken and very thin, who had come to Paris to seek for a son whom she had not heard of for a long time. Reduced to straits, she was told to knock at Rodin's door, probably directed by some one of her fellow country people who had posed as a model. Her tale was listened to, and it was proposed she should sit. The sculptor never had

such a human wreck before him. She consented, gained a little sum of money, and contributed her share to the making of another masterpiece. It is woeful, and it is grand and awe-inspiring, this small bronze nude figure, exposing all the ravages that age and privation can inflict upon the fair outlines of the body. She sits with collapsed shoulders and drooping head, her gaunt left arm grasping the edge of the seat to keep herself steady, while, with spread-out fingers, the right is held behind her back. The two legs clinging together are drawn in against the seat, as if to aid in maintaining the balance; and, from head to foot, the skin bags and wrinkles and hangs about the feeble shrunken muscles, hardening and sharpening the curves that ought to be soft and sweet. . . .

"The second old woman is similar to the first, but she is lying on the ground. Misery and want have had their will. The worn-out body can do no more."

Now, it may be that Lawton did not do his intellectual "nursing" at the breast of the high-priestess who weans most of the charlatan newspaper critics that frequent the cabarets and cafés of Paris, but he is just as excessive as if he had. For, to speak of this scree in bronze by Rodin as "another masterpiece" is only another proof that "imbecility's wing" had fanned his brain before he delivered himself of that rubbish.

When this work was first exhibited in Paris even

"naturalistic" Frenchmen felt ashamed that any French artist should exhibit such an artistic crime. They regarded it as absolutely degenerate, and said so in private—the only place they could say it—for such things are not printed very readily in newspapers, for fear of being sued by such as only seek to give a shyster lawyer a chance to sue a newspaper—as the "Gil Blas" found out to its cost some years ago.

And when Rodin through his friends and "political pull" forced this thing into the Luxembourg Museum, decent Frenchmen either gnashed their teeth or hilariously said with Pompadour, "*Eh bien!* after us the deluge!"

Why is this a degenerate work of art?

First, because it is ugly. No woman is ever beautiful when in a state of decay. And in such decay as here represented she is repellent. No single æsthetic or social excuse can be found for the making of this art atrocity, doubly none for exhibiting it.

Nothing proves more conclusively the innate coarseness and brutality of Rodin's soul than that he should have had the melancholy courage to insist or even allow a poor waif of a widow of 90, bowed down with grief and in search of her lost son, to stand the fatiguing strain of posing long enough to enable him to make this inept thing! None but a cynical vulgarian without pity, could for days look upon such a naked, suffering, shivering, shrinking rag of humanity while he licked his chops with glee over the prospect of the fun he would have with the shocking and jolting he would give that "herd of cattle" the public, by the exhibition of his mere technical somersaulting in this bronze effrontery!

Instead of giving her a little money and letting her go her way with his blessing, he must needs force her, for a pittance, to undress, against all the finer instincts in her, which must have rebelled, to make a pitiable exposé of all the abject decay that comes to all of us through a fiat of nature, and publish that decay to a world that never saw such a thing, because no decent sculptor dared before to make it; to a world that knows all about it, does not care about it, need not be shown it! To the normal and sane portion it is a degrading monstrosity and hence that portion does not want it.

And under what plea did he make it? "Nature is

always beautiful!" a half-truth which Whistler nailed with another half-truth when he said: "Nature is generally wrong!" The fact is—nature is always beautiful only when *perfect*, and she is wrong only when *imperfect*, be the cause what it may.

No amount of hypocritical argumentation under the cry of "Liberty in Art!" will condone the representing of the body of a woman in any other than its most perfect form, and then only in a spirit of utmost chastity and reverence for the ineffable beauty with which the Creator has invested that form—for Cosmic, spiritual reasons—generally beyond the comprehension of the sexopathic vulgarians who infest and degrade the Modernistic Art party. These pull down into a low ditch those in the party who are only misguided and blinded intellectually by the *ignis fatuus*—that it is to-day possible by main strength and awkwardness to produce something that will at once shock the public to a wondering stand-still and have a chance to endure.

The making of a nude statue in any other spirit than that of reverence for the sublime artistry of the Creator is, for an artist, a mistake, to exhibit it a degrading sin, to foist it upon a public museum through political wire-pulling is to debase the public reverence for itself—a disintegrating social crime.

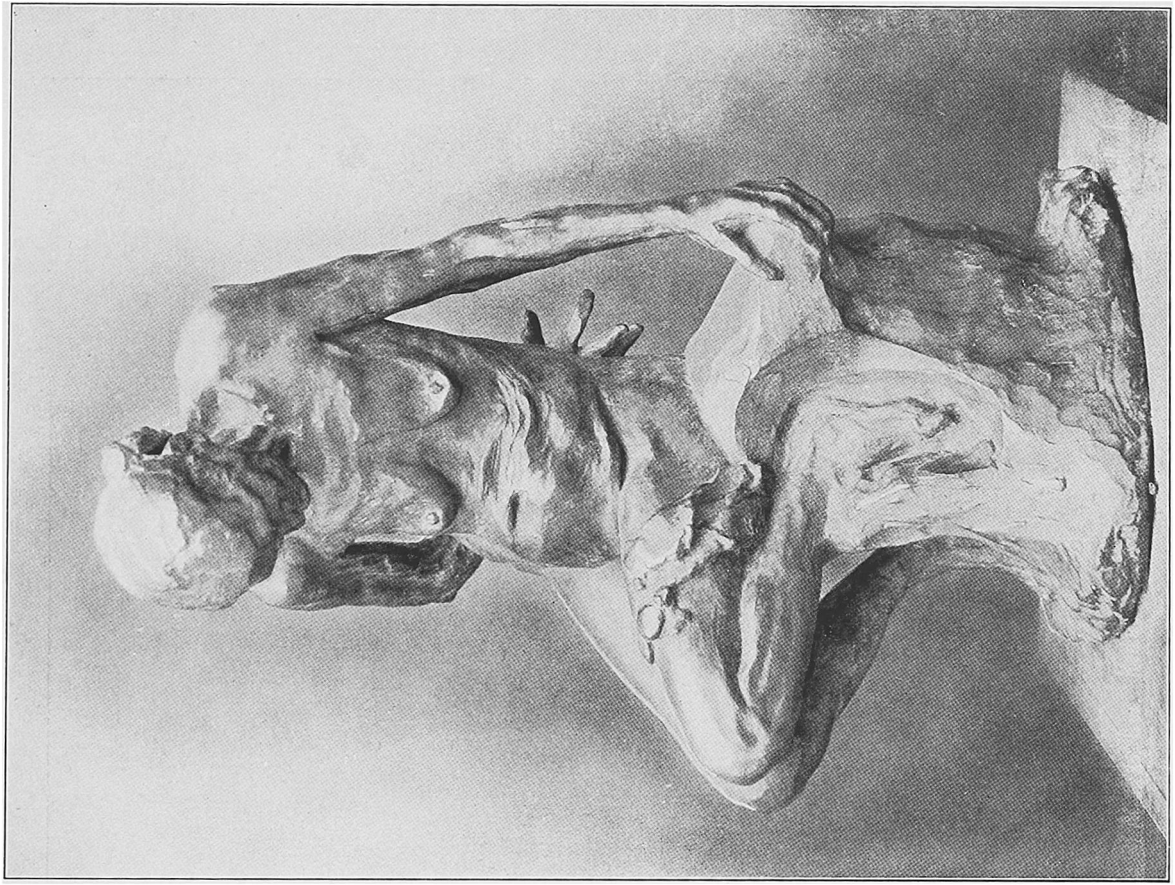
This work by Rodin has shocked the normal public, still shocks it and always will shock it, because it is intellectually monstrous and spiritually degenerate, and its exhibition in the public museum is a social abomination, above all because more than any other work during the last twenty-five years, it has been responsible for and condoned the puerile imitators of the worst side of Rodin's art to fabricate cargoes of art-trash, most of it un-moral and much of it immoral.

Therefore it is a degenerate work of art.

That Rodin must have some unusual talents is evident. Otherwise he would not be so fiercely despised in one portion of the world of art and admired in another.

In a later article we will do full justice to him, to his dexterity—as a finger-workman, and to his real rank as an artist.





THE HELMET-MAKERS WIFE" BY RODIN

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"THE PEASANT OF THE DANUBE" BY VIDAL

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