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Rodin takes on the Parthenon

by Joseph Kang

At first glance, it may be tempting to view "Rodin and the art of ancient Greece" at the British Museum, the first exhibition in which Phidias's Parthenon Marbles have been shown alongside the work of another sculptor, as some kind of competition between modern and classical sculpture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Auguste Rodin spent much of his lifetime studying Greek sculpture, but, until his first visit to the British Museum at the age of forty, he mainly worked from sketches and casts in the Louvre. This midlife encounter with the Parthenon Marbles had a profound influence on Rodin, who later said that "Greek sculpture found its highest expression in Phidias."

Here is a paradox: how did a modernist sculptor who rebelled against the sterile neoclassicism of his day find so much to admire in the Parthenon's sculptures? The exhibition invites us to provide an answer by directly comparing specific works. One such juxtaposition is between Rodin's celebrated piece *The Kiss* (1882) and a sculpture of two reclining figures from the west pediment of the Parthenon. While the latter pair may not be lovers, the sculpture conveys a remarkable intimacy between the figures, carved from one stone to look as if they have been melded into a single being under their flowing folds of drapery. The overall impression is a far cry from the rigid, idealized forms we often associate with classical sculpture. Similarly, *The Kiss* conveys the passion of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo through a sense of desperate physical union—even though their faces are obscured. It does this without merely quoting the Marbles. Rodin's conception of art can be seen in both pieces: an inner essence transformed into the physical realm.

What Rodin most valued in Phidias's work was the direct observation of the physical world combined with the particular genius of the artist, which contrasts with the neoclassical practice of moving from life to the tyranny of sentimental and idealized forms. This can be seen more clearly in *The Age of Bronze* (1877), a work so lifelike that it was initially denounced as being cast from a live model (such a technique was common at the time, but was reserved for studies). The use of contrapposto reached a sharp peak in neoclassical sculpture, but Rodin moderates it in his sculpture, suggesting a certain weakness, or even a flaccidity. The musculature is neither idealized nor formless, but simply a boyish reflection of the soldier who was its model. The same principle is at work in Phidias's sculpture of the river god Ilissos, also from the west pediment. The god seems

to writhe out of the water—a remarkable feat for an enormous piece of marble.

Another of Rodin's insights from the Marbles was the value of the fragment. In the case of the Parthenon Marbles, fragments are the result of the brutality of 2,400 years' time, but for Rodin fragmentation became a deliberate form of expression. He had already used *non-finito*, a technique that makes a sculpture appear as though it is emerging from its marble block. Phidias engaged in his own *non-finito*; a bust here shows the Parthenon emerging out of Athena's head. Throughout the exhibition, we can see the emergence of Rodin's obsession with fragments. There is a case filled with hands and feet, each as expressive as any portrait bust; also included is Rodin's extensive collection of classical fragments. Toward the end of the exhibition, we see the stark forms that characterize the later Rodin: *The Walking Man* (1877–78), for example, a decapitated and armless form striding forward into Modernism. Rodin saw the fragment as a work in itself, and, indeed, he opposed a proposed restoration of the Parthenon. The Marbles had value *as they were*, their power increased by what they had endured through time.

The exhibition succeeds in the way it brings together disparate sculptural works. Almost all of Rodin's main sculptures are represented in this exhibition. The pieces of the Parthenon pediment, originally in sequence, have a particular intensity and completeness when displayed alone, as do the various parts of Rodin's *Gates of Hell* (1880–1917), inspired by Dante's *Inferno. The Thinker* (1904), that heavy, muscular transformation of some mournful inner state, is, of course, on view. Perhaps the most impressive of Rodin's works in the exhibition is *The Burghers of Calais* (1884–89), a piece with no immediate classical inspiration which nonetheless could credibly illustrate the grief and anguish of a Greek tragedy.

Our Virgil through the exhibition is the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who worked for a time as Rodin's secretary. His succinct, eloquent descriptions on the walls capture the nature of the sculptor's craft as only he could. Reflecting on the statue of Pierre de Wissant, part of *The Burghers of Calais*, he wrote that it could be "a monument to all who have died young." I would add that visitors should read Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (1918) before entering the exhibition. It is clear that Rilke, too, saw the mute power of fragments.

What is most surprising about this exhibition is that it hasn't been done before. Though most of the sculptures on display can usually be seen for free at scattered sites in London and Paris, the opportunity to see them in one room is too good to pass up. The senior curator Ian Jenkins's work here meets the exacting standard of the comparative exhibition: the need for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. The route of the exhibition itself, which winds around the sculptures, encourages us to see the sculptures from many different perspectives. The captions are illuminating but never didactic, and the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery is filled from one end with natural light.

Leaving the hall, I felt as though I had learned just as much about the Parthenon Marbles as about Rodin. The Marbles are often mentioned in the context of the contentious debate surrounding their ownership, but that should never obscure how vivid and modern they are. Rodin never visited the

Parthenon or even Greece, and the exhibition carries the suggestion that it isn't necessary for the Marbles to be returned to Greece to be admired. If Rodin could find such inspiration here at the British Museum, why can't we?

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