

Camille Claudel

As a young woman, Camille Claudel was recognized for both her artistic talent and her physical beauty; nevertheless, she spent most of her adult life as a recluse. Much attention has been focused on Claudel's relationship with her teacher, mentor, and lover, Auguste Rodin. Her complex personal drama has brought her prominence through scholarly and popular accounts. Yet it was first and foremost her unrivaled ability to convey narrative through marble and bronze that attracted patrons and critical accolades.

Born in Fère-en-Tardenois, Aisne, Claudel moved with her family to Paris around 1881. She studied sculpture at the Académie Colarossi, one of the few art academies in France open to female students. Along with other sculptors, she also shared an independent studio where Alfred Boucher taught. In 1883 Boucher won a Prix de Rome and departed for Italy; he asked Rodin to serve as adviser to Claudel and her colleagues in his stead.

Two years later, Rodin asked Claudel to become a studio assistant. By working as Rodin's apprentice, Claudel had the chance to study the nude figure, an unusual opportunity for a woman in the 19th century, but one that gave the artist a profound understanding of anatomical nuances. Claudel modeled hands and feet for Rodin's Burghers of Calais and posed for figures in his Gates of Hell.

In 1893, because Rodin's work and stature occupied front stage in French culture, Claudel secluded herself in her studio to disassociate herself from him and to try to establish her own reputation. Her love for portraying the human form resulted in certain sculptures that the state and an infuriated press censored as overly sensual and inappropriate for public display. These circumstances may have contributed to the decline of her career and her mental state. In 1913 Claudel was committed to a mental asylum, where she remained until her death 30 years later.

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