

## Study for a Burgher of Calais (Pierre de Wiessant)

François-Auguste-René Rodin, French, (1840-1917)

study for the figure of Pierre de Wiessant;  
cast in the Alexis Rudier foundry, Paris Figure

**modeled c. 1885 in plaster**

59.20 [G355](#)

Sculpture Bronze, cast about 1902-17



August Rodin was the most successful and influential European sculptor of the late 19th century. He conceived and executed sculptures with a Realist sensibility, but also embodied some of the contemporary Symbolist and Expressionist currents. The public was more accepting of his style, however, than the actual Symbolists.

The discussion about the study of Pierre de Wiessant at the MIA is more about Rodin and the entire sculpture and his approach to all of the individual *burghers*, than a talk about any of the individuals isolated from this magnificent finished monument.

### THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS:

Rodin won the commission to sculpt The Burghers of Calais, commemorating a 1347 episode during the Hundred Years War between England and France. It is probably the best and most successful of Rodin's public monuments.

1347, during the English siege of Calais, France, six leading citizens (*burghers*) agreed to offer their lives in return for King Edward III's promise to lift the siege on Calais and spare the rest of the citizens of the town. Rodin closely followed the account of the French chronicler Jean Froissart (~1333 - 1400) stating that six of the leading citizens (*burghers*) of Calais were ordered to come out of their besieged city with head and feet bare, clothed in sackcloth, ropes around their necks, and the keys of the town and the castle in their hands. They were to bring the keys of Calais to the king and then be beheaded to spare the rest of the city. The king never intended to execute the six men, due to the intercession by the English Queen Philippa; but they were not to find that out until handing the keys over to him.

Rodin has portrayed them at the moment of departure from their city, led by Eustache de Saint-Pierre (the bearded man in the middle of the group). At his side, Jean d'Aire carries a giant-sized key. Each *burgher* is bedraggled and a convincing study of despair, resignation and quiet defiance as they make the sacrificial journey to what they still believe would be their deaths.

The commissioning of this work was prompted by a deliberate policy of raising morale after the disasters of the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing Commune by creating public monuments to patriotic Frenchmen.

The Municipal Council of Calais voted to honor one of their heroes, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, the leader of the six prosperous citizens of Calais who offered themselves as hostages to King Edward III. Rodin proposed that the monument include all six men and supplied a sketch model that won him the commission.

It took more than a decade for Rodin to complete this piece, diligently studying, assembling, modifying, reorienting, rearranging each of the six figures and the composition of all six together. He wanted to capture human pathos and human emotion in each body, as well as in the group. Even though he fully intended to drape clothing on studies when he was done, he couldn't get to the emotional essence of these figures before doing them nude first. [I visited the Musee Rodin in Paris this past summer, and saw a series of these studies - one nude - and headless and handless like the MIA's, one minimally clothed, and the final figure!]

He abandoned the tradition vocabulary of allegorical symbols in favor of individual poses and gestures that reveal character; an innovation that brought this work into conflict with accepted formulas for public monuments. Psychic effects of the *burghers'* journey was further enhanced through the choreographic placement of group members: rather than clustering them into a tightly formal composition, they seem to wander aimlessly. The roughly textured surfaces add to the pathos of the figures and compel viewers' interest.

The Calais commissioners were not pleased with Rodin's conception of the event. They wanted the typically calm, idealized hero, not the ordinary-looking men in various attitudes of resignation and despair Rodin offered, with their exaggerated facial expressions, expressively lengthened arms, greatly enlarged hands and feet, bodies swathed in heavy fabric, and showing not only how they may have looked but how they must have felt while forcing themselves to take one difficult step after another.

The other thing Rodin did that displeased the commissioners was to place the burghers on a low base - instead of the traditional high pedestal. Rodin felt that the usual placement of figures - especially heroes - suggested that only superior humans are capable of heroic action. By placing the figures at nearly ground level, Rodin hoped to convey to viewers that ordinary people are also capable of noble acts, and especially that citizens of Calais could be inspired by a sculpture representative of their ancestors standing at eye level in the center of the city preparing to set off on a sacrificial journey. This lowering of the pedestal would lead, in the 20th C. to the elimination of the pedestal itself and to the presentation of sculpture in the "real" space of the viewer.

## **BIOGRAPHY/ARTOGRAPHY:**

Rodin was born in Paris, trained as a decorative craftworker; failed entry to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts three times, and consequently spent the first 20 years of his career as an assistant to other sculptors and decorators. He went to Italy in 1875 where he saw the sculpture of Donatello and Michelangelo, and after that developed his mature style of vigorously modeled figures in unconventional poses - simultaneously scorned by academics and admired by the public.

Like Muybridge and Eakins, Rodin was fascinated with the human body in motion.

He was also well aware of the innovations of the Impressionists. Color not a factor in his work, but the influence of Impressionism is seen in his abiding concern for the effect

of light on a 3-dimensional surface. In his studio, he often made models move around in front of him while “sketching” with coils of clay.

Rodin’s status as a major sculptor was confirmed in 1884 when he won the competition to do the BURGHERS OF CALAIS.

Rodin’s willingness to stylize the human body for expressive purposes was a revolutionary move that opened the way for more radical innovations of later sculptors.

In his non-commissioned work, from the 1890’s and on, Rodin created increasingly fragmented figures: dozens of versions of disembodied arms, legs, heads drawing inspiration from remains of Greek and Roman sculpture fragments. He liked these works to remain partially unfinished, leaving in place the rough seams from casting plaster and the impressions of fingerprints.

Camille Claudel was an assistant in Rodin’s studio for many years, especially during the sculpting of the Burghers of Calais. She began to study sculpture in 1879, and studied under Rodin starting in 1883. She started working in his studio, became his mistress, and the two had a very stormy relationship for 15 years. While working with Rodin and after, she enjoyed independent professional success, but psychological problems eventually overtook her, forcing her to spend the last 30 years of her life in a mental asylum.

### **IMPACT ON LATER ARTISTS:**

The afore-mentioned lowering to eye-level sculpture in general and heroes specifically.

Willingness to stylize the human body for expressive purposes was a revolutionary move that opened the way for more radical innovations of later sculptors.

Later generations were interested with his fascination with the fragmentary and nonallegorical. 20th C sculpture became so abstract so quickly that it abandoned the human form completely.

Also influential in creating taste for the incompleteness, an aesthetic that many later sculptors embraced enthusiastically.

### **TOURS THIS CAN BE USED ON - practically all tours:**

All modern art tours, especially what influenced newer methods/styles.

Tours about war, peace, conflict.

Even women in art: Camille Claudel (see above)

### **TRIVIA/EXTRA TREAT:**

From SECRET LIVES OF GREAT ARTISTS:

The last thing you would call Rodin was “intellectual.” Genius, no doubt. But, apparently he was no man of reason. So it is ironic that one of his most famous pieces is “The Thinker,” and has been adopted as the universal symbol of philosophy and intellectualism. Rodin preferred a life of action to one of contemplation, and he intended the work to represent an artist like himself. So, this sculptor depicts the monumental effort of artistic creation, the effort to which he devoted his life.

**NB:**

Study for another *burgher* (Jean d'Aire, I believe) is at Mayo in Rochester, MN.

**RESOURCES:**

ArtsConnected

Musee Rodin, Paris

Stokstad, vol.6

Gardner's Art Through the Ages

Multiple websites, including Met Museum...



Burghers of Calais - multiple copies, including in our country: Hirshhorn in D.C.

Dimensions of the finished sculpture: 82.5" high, 95" long, 78" deep

