Auguste Rodin’s *La Terre* - A Rediscovered Sculpture in the Nationalmuseum’s Collections

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The General Art and Industrial Exposition of Stockholm was held between 15 May and 3 October 1897, on the island of Djurgården. It was an opportunity for the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway to display what the union could achieve as an industrial nation, as well as an opportunity to see examples of innovation in the field of industrial design and the arts. The exposition is believed to have had 1.5 million visitors.\(^1\)

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Fig. 1 Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), *La Terre* (The Earth), 1896. Plaster, 47.5 × 114 × 40 cm (h × w × d). Gift at an unknown time during the early 20th century. Nationalmuseum, NMSk 2392.
Rodin's sculptures, particularly those in plaster, aroused both admiration and wonder. One observer stated that the plaster casts showed an “undeniable talent”\(^4\), while another described one of them as “affected and removed from nature […] a cast of some uncovered victim of the eruption in Pompei”.\(^5\) After the Stockholm exposition, Rodin offered to donate one of the plasters to the Nationalmuseum. The sculpture in question was Rodin’s *La Voix intérieure* (The Inner Voice), somewhat later called *La Méditation* by the artist.\(^6\) The sculpture had already been discussed in correspondence between Prince Eugen and Rodin in January 1897, and the sculptor described it as one of his most accomplished.\(^7\) However, at a meeting on 6 November 1897, the Nationalmuseum board – consisting of Carl Nordenfalk, P. D. Holm, Georg von Rosen and N. F. Sander – decided to reject the proposal forwarded by curator Gustaf Upmark, that of the gift of Rodin’s sculpture.

Ironically, this was the cause of an artistic outcry. Some of the leading artists in Konstnärsförbundet (the artists’ association), including Carl Larsson, Richard Bergh, Georg and Hanna Pauli and Anders Zorn, joined forces and wrote to Rodin stating their admiration for the French sculptor and emphasising that they were not involved in the decision. The Nationalmuseum’s decision was leaked by the press as an embarrassment, with the result that the Museum’s management was called before the king to be reprimanded. Oscar II, (Prince Eugen’s father) received the sculpture in the Museum’s stead, as an act of artistic diplomacy, thus making amends to Rodin.\(^8\)

However, this sculpture disappeared in the early 20th century. In October 1908, after the estate of Oscar II was settled, Prince Eugen signed out the sculpture for 10 kronor. Much later, Prince Eugen stated that the sculpture had been given to the Nationalmuseum, where it has not been confirmed as being in the collections.\(^10\) Investigations were also carried out prior to the Nationalmuseum’s *Rodin* exhibition in 2015.\(^11\) However, in the autumn of 2018, a discovery was made in the Nationalmuseum’s warehouse, during an inventory prior to it being moved. Hiding among the Antique plaster casts, at the very back of a shelf, was one that did not appear to be Antique. It was in poor condition, dirtied by previous handling, and lacked an inventory number. On closer examination, a pencil inscription was discovered: “Gift of Rodin”. It soon became clear that this was a plaster cast by Rodin and, naturally, associations were made with the missing sculpture that was supposed to have been donated to the Nationalmuseum. But this was not *La Voix intérieure/La Méditation* – instead, it was a sculpture called *La Terre* (Figs. 1 and 2). How did this come about, and how could it be linked to the refused gift from 1897? What followed was detective work that included ocular analyses of the plaster and research in the archives.\(^12\)

Rodin created *La Terre* in 1894, first as a rough sketch (Musée Rodin S. 00210), then as an enlarged plaster cast, double the size. The sculpture was exhibited frequently between 1896 and 1904. German artist Emil Heilbut (1861–1921) paid 3,500 francs for *La Terre* “grandeur petite nature” cast in bronze by Edmond Groult, and the sculpture was delivered to him in 1900. This bronze then passed through various hands until it was bought back by Rodin in 1913 (S. 00623).

The Nationalmuseum’s plaster cast has visible joins, some wide, others finer. On the bronze, as on the plaster cast of the same size stored in Musée Rodin (S. 03153), the joins are barely visible. However, Musée Rodin also has cast terra-cottas of the small model (S. 00385). These have a network of casting joins identical to the plaster cast in Stockholm, showing that they originate from the same moulds as the original plaster cast (not preserved) used to scale up the work from original sketch. The plaster cast in Stockholm also has double joins.

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Fig. 2 Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), *La Terre* (The Earth), 1896 (Detail). Nationalmuseum, NMSk 2392.
The second joins correspond to those that arose after enlargement. It seems that the plaster version of *La Terre* (which is upright) included in the sculpture called *Absolution* (S. 03452) from c. 1900, has the same network of double casting joins.\(^4\) The hypothesis is thus that there were two casts, made c. 1896, using the same moulds. This hypothesis is also strengthened by the inscription on the plaster cast in Stockholm: “N° 2”. The first cast would thus be the one that was integrated into *Absolution*, and the second would be the plaster cast in Stockholm. There is no doubt that it is an original plaster cast by Rodin; like most of Rodin’s plaster casts it is light and reinforced with horsehair.\(^5\)

In the correspondence between Prince Eugen and Rodin in January 1897, the sculptor proposed that he would like *La Voix intérieure* to end up in the Nationalmuseum.\(^6\) Rodin also disclosed that the same plaster cast was to be shown in the museum in Marseille. It is this letter, written several months before the exposition opened, which has been used in identifying *La voix intérieure/La Méditation* as Rodin’s gift.\(^7\) However, we do not actually know exactly which plaster casts were shown at the 1897 exposition; the catalogue does not provide any titles. Could it be that Rodin sent a different sculpture to Stockholm, instead of *La Voix intérieure*? By returning to the documents relating to Rodin’s work around 1896–97, Antoinette Le Normand-Romain has been able to show that at the same time as Rodin was corresponding with Prince Eugen about the Stockholm exposition, he was also negotiating with Woldemar von Seidlitz (1850–1922), director of Dresden’s museums, on the loan of plaster casts to the international art exhibition in Dresden in 1897. The sculptures had been selected by von Seidlitz’ colleague from Rodin’s works that were exhibited in Geneva in February 1896. Rodin sent a list of works to clarify which these were: “I do not know whether it is the large plaster cast that I have called *La Terre*, this is a beautiful version [épreuve] and I believe this sculpture to be [the] best”. Von Seidlitz responded that he had actually been thinking of another one, but that *La Terre* would be preferable. However, when von Seidlitz and his colleague visited Rodin in Paris in May 1896, they changed their minds and chose a standing female figure instead. The following year, in February 1897, the director from Dresden wrote to say how pleased he was that the sculpture he had selected at Rodin’s had finally arrived at the museum. This sculpture, *La Voix intérieure/La Méditation*, remains in Dresden (Fig. 3).

This episode demonstrates that during this period, 1896–97, there were two new sculptures that Rodin particularly

Fig. 3 Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), *La Voix intérieure/La Méditation* (The Inner Voice/Meditation), 1886. Plaster, 149.5 × 70 × 60 cm (h × w × d). Albertinum, Skulpturensammlung, Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, ASN 4816.
appreciated and wanted to publicise — La Terre and La Voix intérieure/La Méditation. He exhibited them at various French and international exhibitions, and seems to have blithely reasoned that the two sculptures were interchangeable. When Rodin had to send La Voix intérieure to Dresden in early 1897, he appears to have instead sent La Terre to Stockholm in the autumn of that year, apparently without advance warning. In turn, the Swedes were not particularly familiar with Rodin’s sculptures, something that is not least apparent in contemporary assessments (Carl Larsson called Rodin’s sculpture nothing more than “Gipsgubben” — the plaster–cast man³⁰), and the sculpture was thus assumed to be that titled La Voix intérieure, as previously discussed in the letters. Rodin also appears to have forgotten where the sculptures eventually ended up as, in a letter to journalist Judith Cladel (1873–1958) the following year, he stated that La Voix intérieure had gone to the Swedish king.³¹

There is no documentation to confirm the above scenario, but it is not unreasonable that some mix ups occurred for an artist who created thousands of sculptures.³² In 1896–97, Rodin exhibited both his new sculptures, La Terre and La Voix intérieure, at international exhibitions. La Voix intérieures’ striking female figure, with no arms and fragmentary legs, is not mentioned in detail in contemporary criticism.³³ Contemporaneous commentary, such as that comparing the plaster cast at the Stockholm exposition with a victim dug out of the ruins of Pompei, is a better match with the appearance of La Terre: a rudimentary female figure, with incomplete arms and legs, lying face downward, not entirely unlike the forms found in the hardened ash of Vesuvio. Of course, there is nothing to say that Rodin did not send both sculptures to Sweden.³⁴ But the mystery of searching for the sculpture in Sweden for decades, without finding it, also appears more reasonable if you believe this is because the search was for the wrong sculpture.

Notes:
5. Herman Anakreon Ring, “Den franska utställningen”, in Nya Dagligt Allehanda, 22 February 1898. In his review of the Swedish Association of Art’s “Utrustning af arbeten af franska konstnärer. Målning, keramik, väfnd, grafisk konst” (Exhibition of works by French artists. Painting, ceramics, weaving, drawings), Stockholm 1898, Ring refers to this Rodin sculpture exhibited at the Stockholm Exposition in the previous year.
6. La Voix intérieure is a figure from The Gates of Hell tymanum to which Rodin returned ca. 1887, to illustrate the poem “La Beauté” in Les Fleurs du mal by Baudelaire, and which was then integrated in the monument to Victor Hugo around 1894. It was enlarged and shown at the Salon National de la Société des Beaux Arts 1897 in Paris. Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, “Catalogue”, in Auguste Rodin and the Nordic Countries (exh. cat.), Stockholm, Nationalmuseum; Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum, 1 October 2015–8 May 2016, p. 62.
7. Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde’s archive. Thanks to Anna Meister for her help in reviewing the correspondence between Rodin and Prince Eugen.
8. The Nationalmuseum’s authority archive, 6 November 1897; “… the Board decided by 4 votes (Baron Nordenfalk, Messrs. Sander and Holm and Count von Rosen) to 1 (Mr Upmark), to state that the object was not viewed by the Board as of such value that it should be included in the national art collections”.
12. Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, one of the leading experts on Rodin’s art and co-director of the 2015 exhibition, quickly became involved in this work, as were Christine Lancestrème and Chloé Ariot at Musée Rodin in Paris. The author and Nationalmuseum owe them a great deal of gratitude. The following account is a summary of: Linda Hinners, Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, “La Terre au lieu de La Méditation. Découverte d’un plâtre de Rodin au Nationalmuseum de Stockholm”, Revue de l’Art, No. 208/202, pp. 55–64.
14. The work titled Absolution also includes Torse d’Ugoîlin, with a head from La Martyre and a textile drape dipped in plaster. This is typical of Rodin’s process, where he continually varied his sculptures, using new constellations and contexts.
15. The Nationalmuseum’s sculpture conservator Veronika Eriksson is performing a technical conservation project on the sculpture in 2021, funded by the Nationalmuseum’s Donor Circle.
16. Prins Eugen’s Waldemarsudde’s archive.
17. The letter also exists as a handwritten copy in the Nationalmuseum’s authority archive, written on the official letter paper of the Stockholm exposition and attached to the Board’s decision of 6 November 1897 – so the copy was made in Sweden.
20. Rodin sending both La Voix intérieure/Méditation and La Terre to Sweden cannot be entirely discounted.
21. The minutes from the board meeting of 6 November 1897 repeat word for word the description of the sculpture in Rodin’s letter to Prince Eugen from January 1897, a copy of which was appended to the minutes, cf. Hinners/Le Normand-Romain, 2020, pp. 60–61.
22. A short article in the Norwegian Morgenbladet newspaper on 18 January 1903, regarding the Nationalmuseum’s acquisition of Rodin’s bust of Victor Hugo, NMSK 943, refers to the incident in 1897. It states that several sculptures were received by the king and then donated to the Academy of Fine Arts. However, curator Eva–Lena Bengtsson states that there are no traces of these sculptures at the Academy. It is probable that the Norwegian newspaper misunderstood the situation.