

Auguste Rodin (1840 - Meudon 1917)

Christ and Mary Magdalene

Circa: 1908

Marble

109 x 81 cm

Signed 'A Rodin' to the right of the base

1908

Christ and Mary Magdalene is one of Rodin's few sculptures with a religious inspiration. Mary Magdalene clings to the suffering Christ represented with his arms outspread and his head dropping sideways. Their two bodies are intertwined, their polished flesh contrasting against the surface of the unpolished marble. As often, Rodin has combined elements he has experimented with before and the female figure derives from one of the damned souls on the Gates of Hell and was also used in Meditation. The conception of the work began in the 1890s and a maquette in plaster of Christ and Mary Magdalene, realised circa 1894, is in the Musée Rodin, Paris. The group was translated into marble between 1905 and 1908 for August Thyssen who owned several sculptures by Rodin (now in Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid[1]) and again in 1908 for Karl Wittgenstein. The latter visited Rodin's atelier in 1907 and upon seeing the first version in course of execution, he commissioned a second marble from Rodin. The artist pledged to Thyssen not to make more than two marbles of the subject. The two marbles entered private collections as soon as they were finished and were never exhibited during Rodin's life time. But they were photographed in Rodin's atelier[2] and documents in the archives of the Musée Rodin show that the marble destined for Karl Wittgenstein was executed by Rodin's collaborator Victor Peter (who also executed the Thyssen version) in 1908 and sent to Vienna in January of the following year.

Although this is a work of religious inspiration, other titles might have been given to the sculpture according to Georges Grappe[3], such as Genius and Compassion or Prometheus and a Sea Nymph. When Gustave Coquiot, his secretary and biographer, discussed religious inspiration with Rodin, the artist declared that the nude in sculpture was essential for him and the subject of the group might in fact be or Prometheus and a Sea Nymph[4]. With the flowing hair of the Mary Magdalene and her sinous body, the intensely moving group is not without erotic connotations.

Karl Wittgenstein was a Viennese steel tycoon with one of the world's largest fortunes by the end of the 19th century. He was a leading patron of the arts, commissioning works by Rodin and financing the construction of the Secession building Gustav Klimt painted Wittgenstein's daughter Margaret while Gustav Mahler and Johannes Brahms regularly gave concerts at the Wittgenstein palace. His son Paul (1887-1961) became a concert pianist despite having lost his right arm during World War I. Maurice Ravel composed his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand for him. Rodin's Christ and Mary Magdalene was stored in the cellar of the Wittgenstein palace during World War II[5].

Rodin had a strong presence in Vienna, having been invited to participate to the Secession Exhibitions to which he sent many works. He remained a member of the Secession even after the rupture of 1905 and his participation to the Secession Exhibition of 1908 is assumed, even though the artist is not mentioned in the catalogue[6]. His last major appearance in the city was an exhibition of drawings and etchings at the Kunstsalon Heller in January 1908.

The present sculpture will be included in the forthcoming Catalogue critique de l'oeuvre sculpté currently being prepared by the Comité Auguste Rodin at the Galerie Brame et Lorenceau under the direction of Jérôme Le Blay, with the number 2

[1] 102 x 77 x 70 cm. That marble was finished in 1908.

[2] See A. Le Normand-Romain, p. 92 for a photo of the present marble (Musée Rodin archives).

[3] G. Grappe, Catalogue du musée Rodin, 1931, n. 300.

[4] See G. Coquiot, Rodin, Paris, Bernheim Jeune ed., 1915, p. 36.

[5] letter dated 29 September 1943. An export licence for the sculpture was issued in Vienna on 15 January 1964, before the work was sent to Sotheby's in London.

[6] See Rodin and Vienna, p. 13 and onwards.

Provenance

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Commissioned by Karl Wittgenstein (1847-1913), Vienna and delivered in January 1909

By descent to Paul Wittgenstein

Sale, Sotheby's, London, 29 April 1964, lot. 82 (consigned from the estate of Paul Wittgenstein); acquired by

B.M. Pon (1904-1968), The Netherlands, and then his wife Mrs C. Pon-Parlevliet (until 1980) and then by descent to one of their sons to 2013

Exhibitions

Related literature:

A. Le Normand-Romain, Rodin. Les marbres de la collection Thyssen, Paris, 1996, p. 80-81

Rodin and Vienna, exh. cat., Belvedere, Vienna, October 2010 – February 2011

Literature:

Published:

Ivory Hammer 2, the year at Sotheby's, 1963-1964, p. 73, illus.