

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Rodin's monumental sculpture of the French novelist Balzac was formally presented to the Museum of Modern Art yesterday (Tuesday, May 3) as a memorial to Curt Valentin, well-known art gallery director and patron of modern art, in a brief ceremony in the Museum Garden, 11 West 53 Street, where the sculpture has been installed. The presentation was made by Marion Willard on behalf of the Memorial Committee who raised the funds for the sculpture from 130 friends of the late gallery director. It was accepted on behalf of the Museum by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of Museum Collections. On behalf of the numerous out-of-town donors, a message was read from Perry T. Rathbone, Director of the Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

This is the first cast of the famous and much-debated statue ever to be shown in this country and the second Rodin sculpture to enter the Museum Collection. In accepting the Balzac for the Museum, Mr. Barr said:

"With the presentation of this monumental statue by the friends of Curt Valentin, the Museum now becomes the owner of two of Rodin's most celebrated works. The St. John the Baptist Preaching, purchased last fall through the generosity of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, is perhaps the best of Rodin's early realistic figures; the Balzac is the unique climax of his mature style. With the bold modeling, dramatic pose and overwhelming power of the Balzac, Rodin may be said to have initiated the expressionist tradition in modern sculpture. And quite aside from its importance as a pioneer work, the Balzac should take its rightful place as one of the very great sculptures in the entire history of Western art."

Miss Willard in her speech of presentation spoke of Curt Valentin's important role as a supporter and patron of living artists, particularly sculptors.

Perry Rathbone, in his message, dwelt on Curt Valentin's influence throughout America. "When he died last August," Mr. Rathbone said, "there was scarcely a community in America where art is cultivated that had not felt his influence Museums and museum people in Missouri and California were as familiar to him as those in New York. Through his wonderful gift for friendship, Curt Valentin left us the enduring legacy which has enriched all of us and our museums, for through friendship he communicated his own love and understanding of art."

The monumental ten-foot-high figure of Balzac was completed by Rodin in 1897 after extensive research and a great variety of preliminary studies made over a period of six years. It had been commissioned in 1891 by the Société des Gens de

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lettres, but when the original plaster was exhibited in 1898 it aroused intense controversy. The City of Paris joined in the opposition and withdrew its permission to place the figure in the courtyard of the Palais Royal as had originally been intended. After a long battle the Society cancelled the commission and gave it to the academic sculptor, Falguière, who satisfied the society with a more conventional figure.

In 1930 the debate was revived when Rodin's Balzac was shown again at the Salon d'Automne. It was only in 1939 after 41 years that the Balzac was finally erected as a public monument in Paris where it may now be seen at the corner of the Boulevard Raspail and the Boulevard de Montparnasse.

After the first controversy, Rodin took the figure back to his studio in Meudon where a young American photographer, Edward Steichen, photographed it by moonlight. These striking photographs, which were much admired by Rodin himself, contributed to the fame of the Balzac and helped establish Steichen as one of the great living photographers. Mr. Steichen, now the Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, has again photographed the figure in the Museum garden.

In addition to the monument on the Boulevard Raspail there is another bronze cast in the Rodin Museum in Meudon and a third in the Antwerp Museum. It is believed that the Museum of Modern Art's cast is the only one in this country. It was commissioned directly through the Musée Rodin in Paris following negotiations initiated in 1952. Although it had previously exhibited Rodin, the Museum had made no effort to acquire his work until after the change of policy made public early in 1952. This new policy initiated the formation of a small highly selective permanent collection of modern works dating back to the late 19th century.