

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

NY press by messenger
Local general
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No. 1 a

FOR RELEASE: TUESDAY
January 18, 1955

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ACQUIRES RODIN SCULPTURE

The Museum of Modern Art announced today the acquisition of an over life-size bronze St. John the Baptist Preaching by the great French sculptor Rodin. First shown in 1880 in Paris, St. John is generally considered Rodin's greatest early figure. It was acquired for the Museum Collection through the Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

This is the first Rodin sculpture to enter the Museum Collection. Its purchase is in line with the Museum's recently formulated policy of acquiring a limited number of masterworks from the latter half of the 19th century. This replaces an earlier plan abrogated in 1952 of relinquishing to the Metropolitan Museum older "modern" works as soon as they became "classical".

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of Museum Collections, commenting on the newly acquired sculpture says: "Rodin's St. John is first of all a great work of art. But it is also of peculiar value to the Museum Collection because it will serve both as a fundamental basis for comparison and a point of departure. The earliest piece of sculpture in the collection, the St. John is also the most naturalistic. Against its standard of exact though expressive realism, subsequent sculpture of consequence, even Rodin's own, was to react to a greater or lesser degree.

"It is a curious paradox that Rodin, who was later to be condemned for his distortions of the human figure, was at first attacked for excessive naturalism. During the whole time the artist was at work on the St. John he was involved in an absurd but bitter scandal about a slightly earlier male figure, The Age of Bronze. Academic sculptors, shocked by its naturalism and jealous of its prodigiously skillful modeling, accused Rodin of having moulded the cast directly from the living model. He was cleared of this trumped-up charge only after two years of investigation so that in 1880 when the St. John was first shown Rodin was already a controversial figure.

"The St. John also met with critical hostility. The figure was denounced as too naked for a saint who was ordinarily clothed in a goatskin; besides, the pose was awkward, the legs spread too far apart.

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"The model for the St. John was an Italian who had never posed before and was therefore untrained in the conventional gestures of the professional models used by the academic sculptors of the period. As soon as the man began his first session of posing, Rodin told him simply to raise his arm and start walking. After a few moments the sculptor suddenly ordered him to stop and hold his position. With this posture of arrested motion before him Rodin began his work. Yet the effect of the completed statue is anything but static.

"'Movement,' Rodin once said, 'is the transition from one attitude to another.. .. For example while my St. John is shown with both feet flat on the ground, it is probable that an instantaneous photograph from a model making the same movement would show the back foot already raised. Or else the front foot would not yet have touched the ground if the model's back leg were photographed in the same position as my statue.... In photographs of moving figures there is no progressive development of movement as there is in art.... Yet it is the artist who is truthful and photography which lies for in reality time does not stop.'

"Whatever the technical explanation, Rodin's St. John does convey a sense of movement and, more important still, a sense of irresistible vitality. And the vitality seems more than physical. The torsion of the ascetic body, the angular, vehement gestures of hands and arms, the parted lips vividly suggest passionate energies of mind and spirit. Thus, working within the limits of 19th century naturalism Rodin succeeded in creating not only a prodigy of technique but also the convincing image of a preacher, a saint and a prophet."

St. John the Baptist Preaching was executed in 1878 in the artist's Paris studio. A plaster cast was exhibited in the Salon early in 1880 and the first bronze cast was bought four years later by the French government for the Luxembourg Museum in Paris.

Another cast, now owned by the City Art Museum of St. Louis, was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's Sculpture Garden from 1941 to 1945 as an extended loan and again in 1953 in an exhibition Sculpture of the Twentieth Century.

Note: Photographs available on request from the Publicity Department of the Museum of Modern Art, 21 West 53 Street, New York City.