

## Auguste RODIN

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Frontispiece: Eugène Druet, *Rodin in His Studio in Meudon*, 1902 (see 145)

Page 5: Charles Aubry, *Rodin in a Work Shirt*, Gelatin silver print; 11.1 × 7.5 cm (4½ × 3 in) Musée Rodin, Paris/Meudon

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Introduction p.6

- 'When one is born a beggar'
  The Early Years p.11
  - Out of Obscurity
    The Lessons of Michelangelo p.29
    - The Divine Role of Sculpture'
      Of Monuments and Materials p.53
      - Living with Dante
        The Gates of Hell and Rodin's
        Portraits of the 1880s p.67
        - Beyond the Gates
          'Obsession, Celebrity and
          The Burghers of Calais' p.111
          - Monumental Politics
            Hugo, Balzac and the
            'Rock-Trapped' Years p.141
            - The Great Master
              Eros and Worldwide Fame p.173

Glossary *p.*Chronology *p.*Further Reading *p.*Index *p.*204

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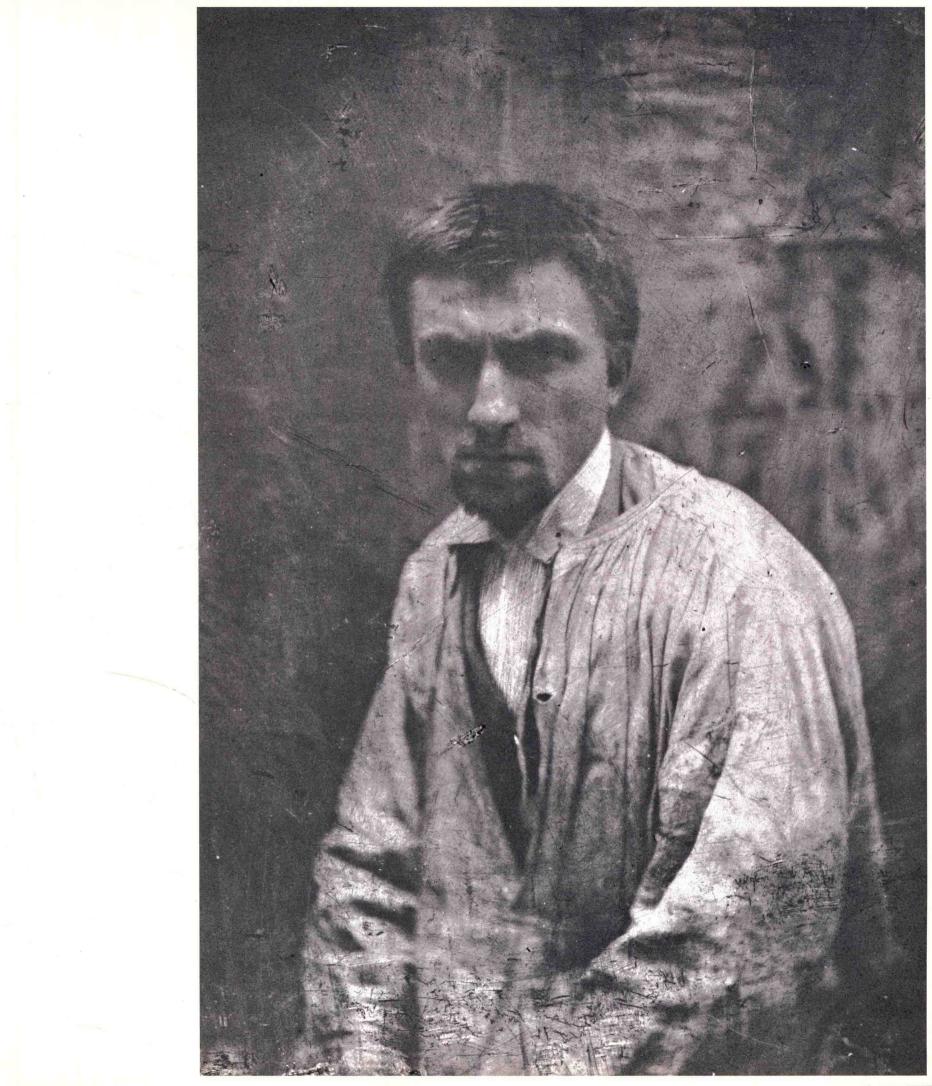


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Introduction p.6

- 'When one is born a beggar'
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    - The Divine Role of Sculpture'
      Of Monuments and Materials p.53
      - Living with Dante
        The Gates of Hell and Rodin's
        Portraits of the 1880s p.67
        - Beyond the Gates
          'Obsession, Celebrity and
          The Burghers of Calais' p.111
          - Monumental Politics
            Hugo, Balzac and the
            'Rock-Trapped' Years p.141
            - The Great Master
              Eros and Worldwide Fame p.173

Glossary *p.*Chronology *p.*Further Reading *p.*Index *p.*204



Auguste Rodin (1) created some of the most original sculptures in the history of Western art. Ground-breaking works, they have a power and an expressiveness that set him apart from contemporaries and that continue to hold meaning for viewers today. The smooth sensuality of his Danaïd (3, 4) and the cosmic turbulence of The Gates of Hell can be instantly grasped and appreciated, the directness of his approach giving the works wide popular appeal. However, make no mistake about it: that his sculpture is easily accessible does not mean that it is simple or uninformed. By 1900 Rodin was recognized as one of the most accomplished artists in the Western world and as the most significant sculptor since Michelangelo. Even England could welcome the works of this quintessentially French artist, a critic for The Art Journal in London referring to Rodin as 'our greatest living sculptor' and explaining that 'we say our greatest living sculptor, for Rodin, like all great geniuses, belongs to the world.' The idea that Rodin's achievement was so immense that it transcended national boundaries was a commonplace in the writings by his contemporaries.

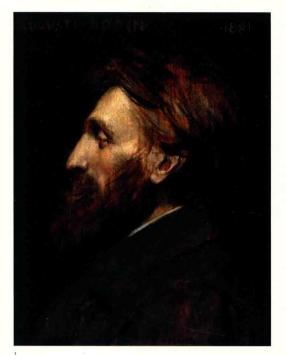
However, Rodin was a late starter, and if he had died at the age of thirty-five, he would probably receive nothing more than a passing mention in the history of someone else's work. Born in 1840 into a working-class family, he spent years struggling against poverty and against his lack of a formal education in the fine arts. He attended a trade school in his teens, to learn the kind of skills that would lead to jobs in the commercial sector, and it was as a day-labourer that he began his working life. All through the early years, he made sculpture in his free time, teaching himself to shape the human form in clay. That he was continually employed meant that the process was long and that progress was made slowly. Not until he was thirty-six did Rodin succeed in creating The Age of Bronze (see 47, 48), the first work in which a sense of his true potential can be seen.

The history of Claude Monet (1840–1926) offers a striking comparison. Born within two days of Rodin, Monet moved to Paris in his early twenties, where he painted full time and gradually developed the style that would become known as Impressionism. On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt (2), done in his twenty-

eighth year, shows all the elements of his mature style. A woman in modern dress sits quietly at the edge of the river, its reflections suggesting a world in perceptual flux. The brushwork is loose, the colours are bright, and a play of naturallooking light and shadow vibrates through the scene. Though Monet was strained financially all through these years, he continued to paint, and by the end of the 1860s he was recognized as an artist of singular accomplishment. To be sure, his paintings were controversial among the French establishment, but his art attracted the deep respect of other painters and of such enlightened, supportive critics as the novelist and critic Émile Zola. By the age of thirty-five Monet had created a sizeable body of work, and had he died then he would still have been acknowledged as one of the most significant artists of the age.

In relating the history of Rodin's sculpture, I have departed in several ways from the traditional monographs about the artist's work. First, I have set Rodin's career into the context of the art world of the period and emphasized the ways in which his sculptures differed significantly from the works produced by his contemporaries. It is no exaggeration to say that Rodin transformed sculpture-making in nineteenth-century France and reinvigorated what was considered to be a dying art form. However, the originality of his works meant that they frequently met with resistance, and in analyzing this aspect of his work I have tried to avoid dismissing his critics as misguided or incompetent, an approach that rarely leads to thoughtful inquiry. Rather, I determined to go beneath the surface of the criticisms and address the deeper issues of what the expectations for sculpture were and how Rodin's works confounded those expectations.

Secondly, I have included in the text an analysis of the making of sculpture in the nineteenth century. Outside the relatively small world of art professionals, it is not often realized that sculpture differed essentially from the more familiar medium of painting, and one of the most important recent shifts in writing about the history of sculpture has been to recognize and discuss those differences. In Chapter 3, for example, I explain the processes by which marble and bronze sculptures were made, and I consider the ways in which mechanical





reproduction played a large role in the production of both. An understanding of these processes should help to avoid the confusion that arises when museum-goers encounter numerous versions of such works as *The Thinker* or *The Age of Bronze* (the latter sometimes with a fig leaf, sometimes without), and have cause to wonder which sculpture is 'the real' *Thinker* or 'the real' *Age of Bronze*. Also puzzling to viewers is the fact that many of Rodin's bronze works bear casting dates well after 1917, the year of his death. In the case of the *Monument to Balzac* and *The Gates of Hell*, even though the

2 Claude Monet, On the Banks of the Seine, Bennecourt, 1868 Oil on canvas; 81.5 × 100.7 cm (31 × 39½ in) Art Institute of Chicago

François Flameng, Auguste Rodin, 1881 Oil on canvas; 48.5 × 37.5 cm (19 × 14¾ in) Musée du Petit-Palais, Paris

bronze versions have become landmarks in the history of sculpture, none of the bronzes was done during Rodin's lifetime. The existence of such oddities, and the legality of posthumous casts, has everything to do with the particular character of nineteenth-century sculpture.

Thirdly, in recent years the Musée Rodin in Paris has published a number of thoughtfully analyzed and rigorously documented accounts of the sculptor's life and works. These publications have deepened and expanded the scholarship on Rodin's works, and I am grateful to have had the benefit of this new wave of research, some of which is not yet available in English. Let me add that in translating documents in this book, I have followed a practice that has become standard today. In the past there was a tendency to overedit original documents, to excise errors of grammar and to rewrite anything that sounded awkward to the reader's ear. As a result, the writers of the original documents often sounded as if they had been privileged to the King's English or trained in the nuances of the Académie Française. Today, more care is given to respect the spirit of the original text and to avoid the effects of literary gentrification.

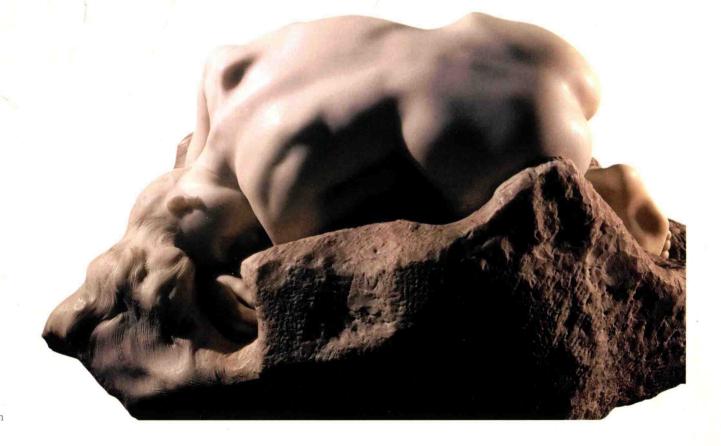
Two more comments remain. Because Rodin's work attracted great attention during his lifetime, I have drawn upon the invaluable essays and articles published when he was alive. After *The Age of Bronze*, Rodin's success

was meteoric, and his sculpture attracted the support of some of the most insightful journalists and art critics of the period. These writings - often done with his cooperation and on the basis of interviews with him - provide rich insight into his life and his works. In the late 1880s T. H. Bartlett, an American living in Paris, met with Rodin repeatedly, and the result of these conversations was a series of articles that were published in 1889. Written by someone who was himself a sculptor, they have an unusual degree of conceptual clarity. Among French critics in the late nineteenth century, Gustave Geffroy and Octave Mirbeau are notable for their astute, first-hand descriptions of Rodin's works and of contemporary reaction to them. In the early twentieth century, the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke worked as Rodin's secretary, as a result of which experience he published Das Rodin-Buch (The Rodin Book) in 1903. Translated into many languages, it gives a rigorous, impassioned and original analysis of the sculptor and his works. Also of importance are Paul Gsell's Auguste Rodin: L'Art, which came out in 1911 and includes extensive comments by Rodin on his working methods and artistic intent; and Henri Dujardin-Beaumetz's interviews with Rodin, which appeared in 1913.

Throughout the writing of this book, I have been indebted to the biography by Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (1993). One

of the difficulties in the literature on Rodin is that once he became famous, he was besieged by journalists who wanted to profile him for an avid, international readership. The story of Rodin's life made good copy because it was a rags-to-riches tale, which suited the mood of the times and which could be made to address the tenacity of the human spirit and the victory of one individual against the power of an establishment. However, some of those contemporary accounts are no more than sentimental puff-pieces, full of unreliable anecdotes and hyperbolic myths. Butler's biography is exceptional for the judicious way she shifted through the evidence and laid to rest many of the erroneous assertions and outright falsifications that appeared in those early hommages.

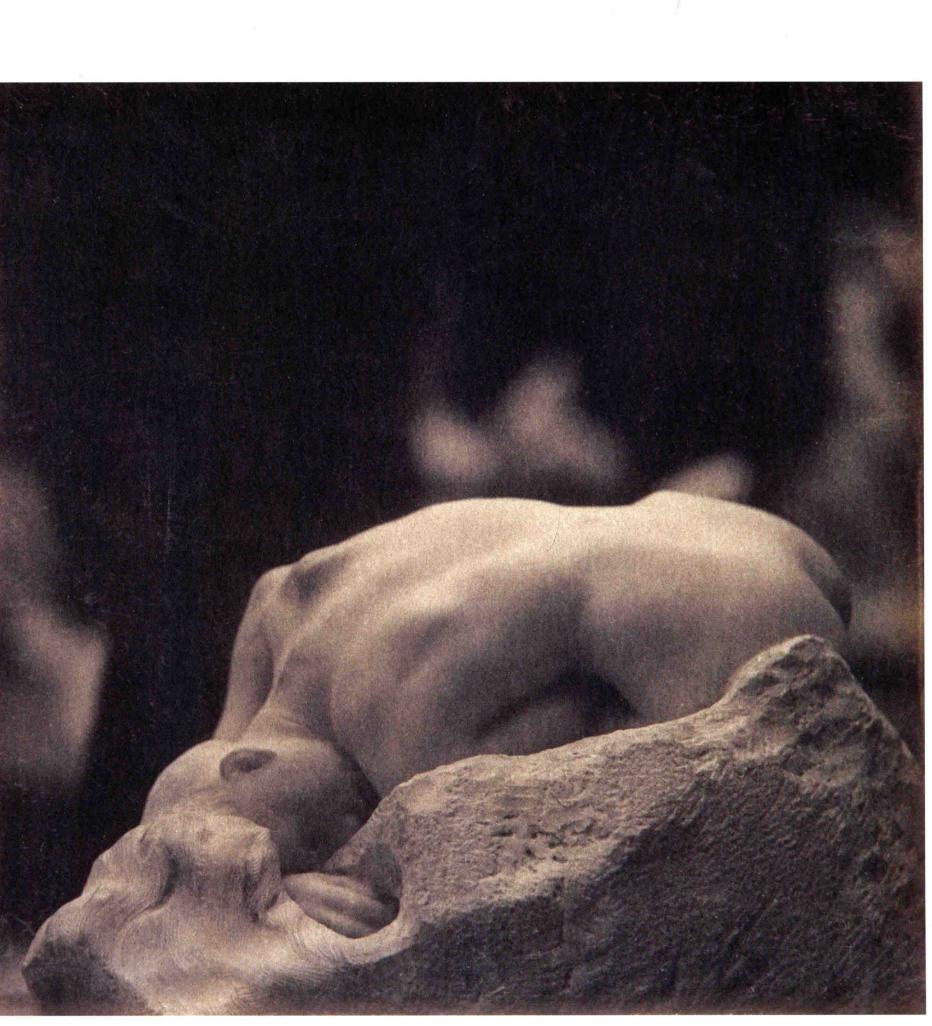
Finally, I wish to mention a technical matter concerning my writing about Rodin's education and training. In describing his background, I have often phrased my comments in terms of the masculine gender, referring to 'a boy's education' or 'young men at the École des Beaux-Arts'. While I could well have avoided the issue of gender, and written about 'an artist's education' or 'students at the École des Beaux-Arts', I believe it is important to indicate to the reader that in the nineteenth century men and women inhabited different spheres and that females were excluded from many of the educational opportunities available to males.



3
Danaïd, c.1889
Marble carved by Jean
Escoula; 36 × 71 × 53 cm
(14½ × 27 × 20 in)
Musée Rodin, Paris/Meudon

4 Stephen Haweis and Henry Coles, *Photograph of Danaïd*, 1903–4 Carbon print Musée Rodin, Paris/Meudon



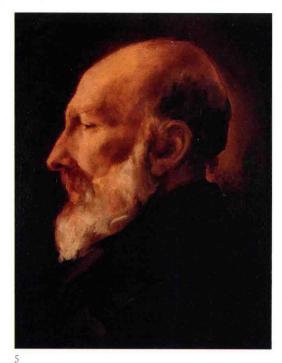


'When one is born a beggar' The Early Years As Rainer Maria Rilke put it, Rodin 'must have had a childhood of some sort' – but it was 'a childhood of poverty, dark, groping and uncertain'. His father, Jean-Baptiste Rodin (5), had come from the town of Yvetot, in Normandy, where his family had been cotton merchants and weavers. By 1828 he had found work as an office boy in the police department, and in 1836 he married Marie Cheffer, who came from the village of Gorze in Lorraine. The couple's first child, Anna Marie, called Maria, arrived in 1837, and their second, François-Auguste-René Rodin, was born on 12 November 1840. The family was Roman Catholic, and Auguste was baptized two months after his birth.

The apartment in which they lived was located on the rue de l'Arbalète, in a building that remains standing today (6). The street is a narrow, cobblestoned passage, hardly more than an alleyway in width, and the name l'Arbalète, which translates in English as Crossbow Street, is said to date to the Middle Ages. At the time Rodin was born the area was known as one of the poorest in the city and contained some of its worst slums.

Though Rodin's father was employed by the police department, his salary was so low that one wonders how the family survived. After 1848 he was given a desk job in the police department, with the title of 'Inspector', which suggests that his situation might have improved considerably. However, he was paid very little, and in 1860, at what was probably the high point in his career, he earned no more than 1,400 francs per year. Though it is difficult to convert this figure exactly into today's terms - spending patterns having changed radically over the past century and a half - the historian Alain Plessis has estimated that in those years the lower limit for a middleclass family living in Paris would have been about 5,000 francs a year. With Jean-Baptiste's salary far below that, the family lived in conditions of grinding poverty rather than what might more gently be described as slightly hard up or just getting by. The family moved constantly, but always remained within the Left Bank's poorer neighbourhoods. Recent documents establish that Rodin's mother bore two further children, a son and a daughter, both of whom died in early childhood.

Rodin began drawing at an early age, as he described to Henri Dujardin-Beaumetz: 'Even



when I was very young, as far back as I can remember, I made drawings. A grocer, for whom my mother worked, wrapped his prunes in paper sacks made from the pages of illustrated books and even with engravings. I copied them. They were my first models.' By the late 1840s he was attending a primary school, the School of the Brothers of Christian Doctrine, close to the apartment in which he had been born. He was not a particularly good student, and though he later became an avid and in many ways articulate correspondent, his mastery of French spelling and grammar would always be rough and uneven. Part of the problem may have been his nearsightedness, which went unrecognized and untreated for many years.

It is easy to romanticize the past and to think that life when Rodin was growing up must have been simpler and more civilized than anything we know today. However, living conditions were remarkably primitive in the period, with few of the modern conveniences that enhance the quality of daily existence. Railways – a development that would greatly increase geographic mobility – were just beginning to be laid down. Automobiles had not yet appeared, the métro had not been built, and even the invention of the bicycle lay many years ahead. People

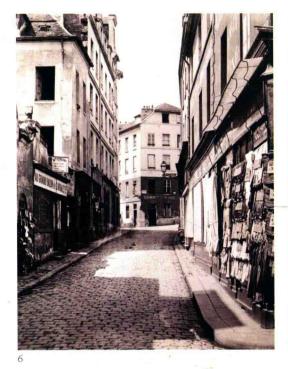
moved through the city on foot, in a carriage if they had the means, or in public transport that consisted of horse-drawn taxis and omnibuses. The smell of manure was ubiquitous, and the streets were noisy with the sound of vehicles racketing through the city on metal wheels. With indoor plumbing a development of the future, sanitary conditions were primitive. Streets were lit by gas lamps, interiors by candles and oil lamps, and fires were a constant menace.

The city was overcrowded as well, particularly in the working-class neighbourhoods. With an increasingly heavy influx of people, the population of Paris had swollen dangerously by mid-century. Early in the 1800s there had been a minuscule increase in the city's population, but between 1830 and 1850 massive numbers of people, including Rodin's parents, left the country's rural areas and moved to Paris in search of jobs. In just those two decades the city's population doubled, so that by mid-century there was an acute housing shortage and a high unemployment rate, accompanied by periodic epidemics of such diseases as cholera. All of these conditions contributed to produce a climate of festering unrest.

Tensions exploded in February 1848, and Paris erupted in civil war (7). Sparking the violence was the infuriating complacency of King Louis-Philippe (reigned 1830-48), who refused to address the problems that cities like Paris faced and who remained convinced that his position was unassailable. Hatred for his policies surfaced soon after he came to power, and because it was illegal to attack a monarch directly, caricaturists devised the image of 'the pear' to express their disgust (8). In French slang the word poire (pear) connoted someone who was soft and malleable, a dupe or a pawn, and unfortunately both Louis-Philippe's head and body bore a resemblance to the fruit's bottom-heavy, rounded form. All through the early 1830s the pear turned up in popular satirical newspapers like Charles Philipon's La Caricature and Le Charivari, as a pungent, irreverent device that satirized a plump and feckless king. When distrust for his regime continued to grow, Louis-Philippe introduced harsh censorship laws, which effectively put an end to the caricaturists' use of the pear.

The civil war of February 1848 succeeded in ousting Louis-Philippe, after which the Second Republic was established. The turbulence

<sup>5</sup> Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Rodin, 1860 Oil on canvas; 40 × 30.5 cm (15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 12 in) Musée Rodin, Paris/Meudon





continued, however, and in June of that year a second wave of revolution saw the city viciously polarized across the barricades. When elections were finally held, at the end of 1848, Louis-Napoléon, nephew of Napoléon I, was chosen as the republic's president. The republic proved to be short lived, and three years later he effected a coup d'état and took virtually all aspects of the government – the legislature and the courts included - into his own hands. He imprisoned his critics and enacted strong censorship laws, so that protest was effectively suppressed. By December 1852 the republic was dead: Louis-Napoléon declared himself Emperor Napoléon III and set himself up to rule for life. His regime, the Second Empire (1852-70), put paid to the humanitarian concerns of the republic. The era now became one of conspicuous consumption and display, exemplified by the extravagant lifestyles of Napoléon III and his court and by the lavish pageants organized by his government. In characterizing the period, historians have often invoked the idea of an empire of spectacle, thus indicating the importance that appearances, rather than substance, came to assume during this period.

Remarkable in Rodin's reminiscences about his youth is the absence of reference to the

political turbulence that gripped the country as he was growing up. Some of the worst violence of the revolutions of 1848 occurred in the workingclass neighbourhoods of the Left Bank, and yet he and his family seem to have insulated themselves from the fighting and from the events that followed. Perhaps political involvement was too much of a luxury for a family so hard pressed or perhaps Jean-Baptiste's work for the police department had a deeply cautionary effect. Whatever the cause of Rodin's silence, it suggests a detachment from politics - an attitude that would persist throughout his life. Even in later years, when Paris saw further outbreaks of war and civil unrest and when politics played a significant role in a number of the commissions Rodin received, he remained remarkably disengaged. This sort of distance from contemporary events is highly unusual for an artist whose works would be seen as so deeply characteristic of the period in which he lived.

In 1851, just before he turned eleven, Rodin was sent to Beauvais, some eighty kilometres (fifty miles) north of Paris. Here, one of his father's brothers, Jean-Hippolyte-César Rodin, ran a boys' school where Rodin boarded for the next three years. Though it might sound as if the family's financial situation had eased and that he

now enjoyed a luxury available only to boys from privileged families, this was not the case. In those days, state-funded education for boys lasted only through primary school, and as mandated in 1832 every neighbourhood had to have at least one primary school that offered a free education to boys whose families could not afford to pay tuition. After these early classes, education was determined by a family's economics. Wealthier boys could go on to further study at a lycée or collège, which generally charged substantial tuition, while the most that a poor boy received, unless he obtained a scholarship, were two or three more years of classes offered at places like that of Rodin's uncle. The education in these schools tended to be rudimentary, amounting to no more than a sort of advanced primary schooling. The historian Michelle Perrot put the matter succinctly: 'Poor and peasant families who wished to prolong their sons' education were obliged to send them to boarding schools, but bourgeois families kept their boys at home and sent them to study as day students whenever possible.'

Whatever he may or may not have learned during his school years in Beauvais (biographers being divided about the sort of student he was), Rodin was greatly impressed by the architecture

Charles Marville, Rue de l'Arbalète, from the Rue Mouffetard, Paris, 1858–78 Albumen print Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, Barricade on the rue Saint Martin, Night of February 23 to 24, 1848 Engraving Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris