
Context.

1884, French city of Calais commissioned Rodin to make a public monument to honor the 6 burghers (city councilmen) who volunteered to give up their lives during the Hundred Years War with England (1347). They were ultimately spared. The city officials who commissioned it expected a traditional heroic commemorative monument high up on a pedestal. Rodin did place it on a high pedestal (not how he wanted it portrayed), but the city was disappointed with the sculpture and its lack of overt heroicism. They wanted idealism, heroic calm depictions in the face of self-sacrifice.

Because Rodin had to place it on a pedestal for Calais, he made another one to be displayed in Paris with its intended composition.

Rodin is the most important and influential late 19th c. sculptor because (1) he refused to be bound by traditional expectations for sculpting the human figure and (2) he emphasized emotional expressiveness and psychological realism in his figures.

His inspirations were Donatello and Michelangelo, from whom he learned that expressions and gestures communicated psychological states.

Rodin’s desire to create psychological realism leads him to diverge from anatomical realism:

- hands and feet enlarged
- arms lengthened
- expressions exaggerated

To communicate the emotional weight they must have felt, he makes the cloth rough and heavy, falling in thick deep folds all the way to the ground.

In the round

He wanted to make the point that these were ordinary people like us who did an extraordinary thing, as all of us have the potential of doing. He also wanted the 19th c. citizens of Calais to feel connected to them.

How he achieves his goals:

- He puts the figures on a base only a few inches high to put them on the same level as the viewer.
- He depicts the figures as lifesized and unidealized, NOT as heroically-scaled and beautiful.
- He aims for believable human responses which the burghers would have had: anger, despair, disbelief, sadness, quiet resignation - NOT superhuman calm and stoicism.
- The figures are highly individualized, which adds to the impact of their individual psychological responses. They stand in close proximity but none looks directly at another.
- Rodin places the group roughly in a circle, all about the same height, no one the focal point, encouraging us to walk around and contemplate the group from multiple vantage points.