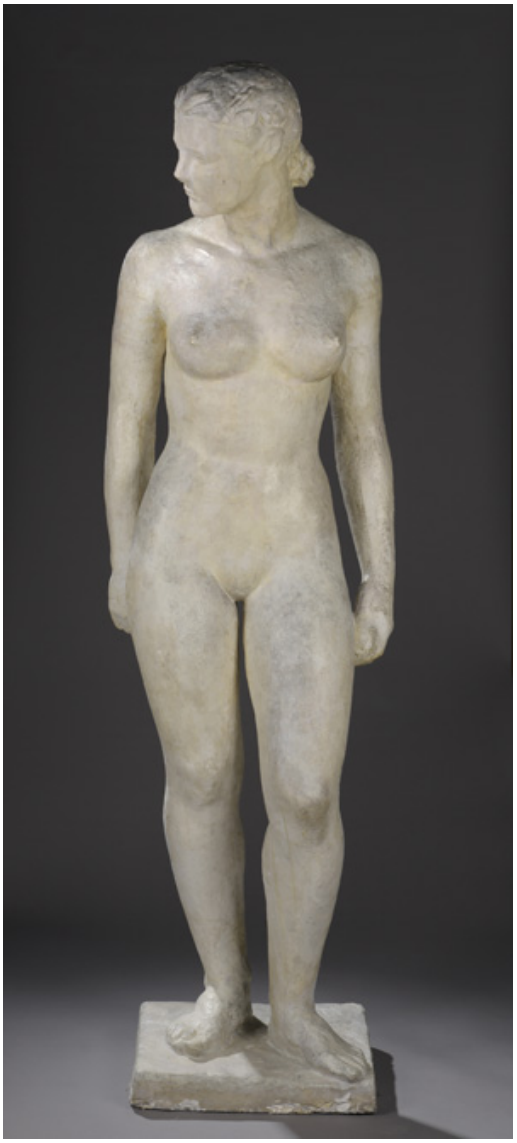


CHARLES DESPIAU (1874 - 1946)

Assia

Plaster proof
Dedicated and signed : « A Georges Wildenstein / bien cordialement / C. Despiau »
H. 184 cm

Provenance

- Artist's studio
- Georges Wildenstein Collection
- Private French collection

It is presented in the artist's catalogue raisonné, established by E. Lebon, under number: Cat.125-2(2)P(g)

Pertinent Bibliography

- 1934 GUENNE: Jacques Guenne, "Charles Despiau," *Les cahiers de Radio-Paris*, January, 15 1934, p.49-50.
- 1937 ARTICLE: Léon Deshairs, "Regards sur l'œuvre de Charles Despiau" ("Considerations of the Work of Charles Despiau"), *Art et Décoration*, Tome LXVI, 1937, p.142, repr.
- 1939 ARTICLE: "Deux chefs-d'oeuvre de la sculpture française - L'Assia de Despiau et le Désir de Maillol entrent au musée Boymans de Rotterdam" ("Two Masterpieces of French Sculpture: Despiau's *Assia* and Maillol's *Desire*), *Beaux-Arts*, January 13, 1939, p.1, repr. (large bronze)

- 1945 ARTICLE: Agnes Rindge, “Charles Despiau,” *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, January, 1945, p.7, repr. p.7 (large bronze)
- 1954 WALDEMAR GEORGE: Waldemar George, *Despiau,* Berlin, Kiepenheuer & Witsch Köl., coll. “Europaïsche Bildhauer,” 1954, repr. Pl.24 (plaster)
- 1993 EXPOSITION: *Assia, sublime modèle,* Mont-de-Marsan, Calais, Poitiers, November 10 1992-June 12, 1993 (Christian Bouqueret : “Assia, sublime modèle,” p.13-34, et “Assia, éléments d’une vie” (“Assia, the Elements of a Life”), p.35-36 - Elisabeth Lebon, “L’Assia de Despiau”, p.39-46)
- 1995 THESIS: Elisabeth Lebon, *Charles Despiau (1874-1946) – catalogue raisonné de l’œuvre sculpté*, Dissertation for a Ph.D. in Art History at the Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1995, tome II volume 2, p.424-439
- 2006 BOUQUERET: Bouqueret, Christian, *Assia, sublime modèle*, Marval, 2006.
- 2016 LEBON: Elisabeth Lebon, *Charles Despiau, classique et moderne*, Atlantica, Biarritz, 2016, p. 156-162

Selected Exhibitions: (only exhibitions of the life- version with the ears uncovered are listed)

- 1937 PARIS: *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, bronze, Paris, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1937
- 1937 PARIS: *Les Maîtres de l’art indépendant*, plaster, #41, Petit Palais, Paris, 1937
- 1938 LONDON: *Sculpture by Despiau,* **plaster, n°23**, bronze, n°26, repr., **Wildenstein and Co gallery**, London, 1938
- 1938 ROUEN: *Charles Despiau, sculptures et dessins* (*Sculptures and Drawings*)*,* plaster, n°20, repr., musée de Peinture, sculpture et arts décoratifs, Rouen, 1938.
- 1939 NEW YORK: *Art in our time,* bronze, n°266 (plaster reproduced in the catalogue), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939
- 1946 PARIS: *Présentation des collections du Petit Palais – L’Art moderne*, bronze, n°99, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1946
- 1948 NEW YORK: *Charles Despia–sculpture*, bronze, n°17, Buccholz Gallery, New York (USA), 1948
- 1950 ANTWERP: *Première exposition internationale de sculpture en plein* air, bronze, n°36, Middelheim Park, Antwerp (Belgium), 1950
- 1957 COLOGNE: *Bundesgartenschau*, bronze n°11, repr., Cologne (Germany), 1957
- 1957 PARIS: *Rodin, ses collaborateurs, ses amis* (*Rodin, his Collaborators, his Friends*), bronze, n°33, musée Rodin, Paris, 1957

- 1959 DORTMUND: *Französische Plastik des 20* Jahrhunderts, bronze, n° 34, Museum am Oskwall, Dortmund (Germany), 1959
- 1959 CHARLEROI: *De Maillol à nos jours (120 sculptures et dessins du Musée national d'Art moderne de Paris* (*From Maillol to Today, 120 Sculptures and Drawings*), bronze, Palais des beaux-arts, Charleroi (Belgium), 1959
- 1966 MOSCOW: *(Rodin et son temps)*, bronze, Pushkin Museum, the Hermitage Museum, Moscow (URSS), 1966
- 1973 PARIS: *Salon d'automne: hommage à Elie* Faure, plaster, Paris, 1973
- 1974 PARIS : *Charles Despiau, sculptures et dessins*, bronze, n°83, repr.83, musée Rodin, Paris, 1974
- 1974 PARIS: *La Bande à Schnegg*, bronze, n°71, repr. pl.I, musée Bourdelle, Paris, 1974.
- 1975 MONT-DE-MARSAN: *Charles Despiau (1874-1946)*, plaster, bronze, Donjon Lacataye, Mont-de-Marsan, 1975
- 1979 SAINT-ETIENNE: *L'art dans les années trente en France* (*Art in France in the 1930s*), bronze, n°81, repr. p. 55, musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Etienne, 1979
- 1987 PARIS: *Paris, 1937, l'art indépendant*, bronze, n°8, repr. p.56, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1987
- 1993 MONT-DE-MARSAN: *Hommage à Despiau*, plaster, Centre d'art, Mont-de-Marsan, 1993
- 1997 various cities JAPAN: *Charles Despiau (1874-1946)*, The Miyagi Museum of Art- Mie Prefecture Art Museum - Kumamoto Prefecture Museum of Art - Ohara Museum of Art - Yamanashi prefecture Museum of Art - Hyogo Prefecture Museum of Modern Art, Kobe - The Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki – June 7, 1997 to March 22, 1998 (Bilingual French-Japanese catalogue), n°50, repr. p.167, notice p. 202 à 204 (in French – in Japanese p. 144-145), preparatory drawing p. 235
- 2010 METZ: *Chefs-d'œuvre?* (*Masterpieces?*) bronze, Centre Pompidou-Metz (inaugural exhibition), Metz, 2010
- **2013 BEELDEN-AAN-ZEE: *Charles Despiau, sculpteur mal-aimé* (*Misunderstood Sculptor*), Museum Beelden-aan-Zee, Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, 2013, n°40, repr., p.208**

Charles Despiau

During his lifetime, for the first half of the 20th century, Charles Despiau was the most universally admired sculptor of busts, appreciated as much by his peer sculptors as by the great collectors of modern art, as well as by all the critics, regardless of their proclivities. Their high quality is readily apparent in many remarkable works, such as *Assia*, which he considered his masterpiece.

Despiau showed alongside Matisse, Brancusi, Picasso, Zadkine, and Henri Laurens. Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz, Germaine Richier, and many other sculptors whose works are now seen as emblematic of modern art openly showed a great respect and admiration for his work.[1] Between the wars, he and Maillol constituted the driving force of modern figurative sculpture and were recognized as such all over Europe, the Americas, and as far away as Japan.

Before the First World War, Despiau was first noticed and praised by the young sculptors who were drifting away from Rodin's influence, but also by Rodin himself, who employed him as an assistant on his marbles. The international exhibition of 1925[2] opened the way to an international career for him. The most prestigious museums and great collectors (Wertheim, Wildenstein, Guggenheim, Crowninshield, Meyer…) competed for his works, which he produced only slowly.

Despiau's modernism was seen as related to Cézanne's and Matisse's, and it was in that light that he was understood and valued by his contemporaries. Charles Despiau was first recognized outside of France, and he didn't receive any official recognition in his own country until the 1937 exhibition. There, for the first time, he publicly displayed the figure of *Assia*, which he'd been working on secretly in his studio for four years.

The Model: Assia Granatouroff

Assia Granatouroff (1911-1982) was a Russian exile who arrived in Paris at the age of ten to join her father under extremely difficult and unusual circumstances. She posed for number of photographers, including Emmanuel Sougez, Ergy Landau, Roger Schall, Dora Maar, and Rogi André. She also posed for artists, and though the works have not been identified, it is thought that she sat for André Derain, Moïse Kisling, Gromaire, Suzanne Valadon, de Waroquier, Céria, Paul Belmondo, and Chana Orloff.

With her earnings, she began studying for the theater, and she developed a serious career, specializing in tragic roles in plays directed by Charles Dullin and performing beside Edwige Feuillère, Louis Jouvet, and Danielle Darrieux. Arrested by the Gestapo during the war, she managed to get free and joined the Resistance, taking the name of Assia Granatour. As soon as she entered Despiau's studio, he was conquered: "*He sat down, stunned, and cried 'Her shoulders are Egyptian, and her pelvis is Greek!'*".[3]

The Work

Assia said that the sculptor first did three sketches in clay before starting to work on the plasters. Each plaster was redone in plastiline before being molded. This process went on for four years. Despiau initially worked in half life-. He experimented with a version in which the hair covered the ears, but he gave that one up, probably because the effect of a cap or a crown seemed too anecdotal.[4] He also did a half life-d version without arms. Then a definitive model of the pose with the ears exposed was done in half- before being enlarged to a life- version.

One hand is tucked slightly behind her back, creating a straight line of the arm, the shoulder, and the torso, while the other hand rests lightly on the thigh, and the torso pivots slightly in a motion that suggests a dynamism, and yet remains completely in balance. Only a long and careful contemplation of the work can reveal its masterful mapping. Every line must be studied, with careful attention to the ways that they all link, intersect, support, and respond to each other, as well as the way they guide the shadows, emphasizing each illuminated prominence and its corresponding shadowed hollows, which all come together into a series of linked subtleties.

Assia is a nude, but it's not only a nude; it's a woman of the 1930s with a strong personality, who finds herself solid, strong, dynamic, intelligent, capable, and free.

Did Despiau succeed in creating a modern *Venus* with his *Assia*?[5] If one judges by the opinions of his contemporaries, there's no doubt about it. "*Assia* of 1938 reflects the taste of the time, easily, unconsciously, as sculpture that is part of that time," wrote Agnes Rindge in the Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[6]

The new museum of modern art in of the city of Paris, which opened its doors in time for the 1937 international exhibition, showed the bronze, and the piece attracted much attention.

Despiau considered the plaster version of *Assia* as a finished work in its own right, and he presented it at the other great event of 1937, the exhibition at the Petit Palais, *Maîtres de l'art independent* (*Masters of Independent Art*), where the piece was given a prominent place.

Ten proofs were planned for the large bronze, and the first ones cast quickly found places in prestigious museums, beginning with Middelheim Park in Antwerp and the Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1938 and MoMA in New York in 1939. By 1952, all the proofs had been cast. Most of those that went into private hands remained there, and the work rarely comes up for public sale. Of the large plasters known today, all of them except this one and one other are in public collections.

The Dedication of Our Plaster

This proof is dedicated to Georges Wildenstein (1892-1963), a member of the Academy as well as an important gallerist, dealer, and collector. He had two other works by Despiau in his collection, a bust of *Lucien Lièvre* and a bust of *Marie-Zéline Faure dite Zizou* (*known as Zizou*). The plaster of *Assia* was displayed in the entrance hall of the Wildenstein Institute at 57 rue de la Boétie. Wildenstein showed Despiau's works in his London gallery during the summer of 1938, including a plaster and a bronze of *Assia* (*Sculpture by Despiau*, plaster, #23, bronze #26, repr. Wildenstein and Co. Gallery, London, 1938).

Editions of the Model

Plasters
Six other plaster proofs of the same model in the same dimensions are currently known.
Despiau gave or sold these plasters as finished works to the following collectors: Madame Pomaret (wife of the minister, ex-wife of the curator of the Petit Palais and founder of the journal *La Renaissance*, which was connected to the museum at the Luxembourg), Doctor Debat, and the dealer-gallerist Georges Wildenstein. The other proofs remaining in Despiau's possession were given away by his widow and today are in the following public collections:
* Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, not inventoried, plaster in progress with repairs in plastiline, most likely a gift from Léon Deshairs (Despiau's first biographer)
* Bordeaux, musée des Beaux-Arts, Inv. D. 52.7.9, stores of the national museum of modern art, Inv. AM.4115s (unknown provenance: perhaps a legacy from Mme Despiau?)
* Mont-de-Marsan, Musée Despiau-Wlérick, Inv. MM24, gift of Mme Despiau through the Association des Amis de Despiau et Wlérick (The Association of the Friends of Despiau and Wlérick)
* Mont-de-Marsan, Musée Despiau-Wlérick, Inv. MM25, gift of Mme Pomaret née Fontenelle (acquired from the artist)
* Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Inv. AM.1091s, gift of Mme Despiau to the national museums
And in a private collection:
* Perth (Australia), Marjon collection, previously the collection of Dr. Debat (acquired directly from the artist)

Bronzes
Cast by Alexis Rudier, 185 x 44 x 44 cm, 10 proofs irregularly numbered /10
* Antwerp (Belgium), Middelheim Park, inv. 4

* Dijon (France), Musée des Beaux-arts, assigned to the museum by the l'Office des Biens privés (The Office of Private Goods), Commission de récupération artistique, Inv.Rec.8s
* Paris (France), Musée national d'art moderne, assigned to the museum by the Commission de récupération artistique, Inv.Rec.7s
* Paris (France), Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Inv.Ams.408 (commissioned by the city, acquired December 30, 1936 for 100,000 francs)
* New York (New York, USA), Museum of Modern Art, Inv.334.1939
* Rotterdam (The Netherlands), Musée Boymans-Van Beuningen, Inv.Bek.1244
* Toledo (Ohio, USA), The Toledo Museum of Art, Inv.50.241
* Private collection (France), proof numbered 8/10 (previously the collection of Dr. Salavin)
* Cologne (Germany), Walraf-Richartz Museum (Museum Ludwig), number 10/10, Inv.ML76/SK188
* As of this time, there is one proof that has not been located.

Four proofs bearing the founder's mark C. Valsuani and marked "E.A." (épreuve d'artiste / artist's proof) were cast off of the plaster in the Wildenstein collection (described here); they include the dedication. For several reasons—uncertainties regarding who commissioned them, when they were commissioned, the patinas on the proofs that could be examined, which are unusual for Despiau, and the fact that the authenticated proofs were all cast by Rudier—these bronzes have been left out of the catalogue raisonné until proof of Mme Despiau's authorization can be established, as the current rights-holders, who succeeded her, have not authorized them.

A bronze based on the plaster from the Association of the Friends of Despiau and Wlérick (the Susse foundry), was cast by the city of Mont-de-Marsan and placed in front of the city hall.

Same version (ear uncovered), **half-size**

Before working on the enlargement, Despiau first did this figure in half life- (91 cm). Currently the locations of two plasters are known (one at the fine arts museum of Valenciennes—inv.S.Y.99—and the other in a private French collection, Despiau having given it to a friend on the occasion of his marriage). There is also a series of seven (or six) proofs numbered /7 in bronze, which may all be posthumous casts.[7]

A plaster cast of a study for the head of *Assia, Ear Uncovered* also exists and is held in a private collection (Landes, H. 19cm).

Despiau did not allow any photographs to be taken of *Assia* as he was working on it, which clearly shows that did not want to present this work in any way until it had been completely finished in the version that he presented in 1937, which is to say, the life- version with the ear uncovered, both in plaster and in bronze.

(Extracts of a text by Elisabeth Lebon)

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[1] In 2018, the exhibition *Giacometti, entre modernité classique et avant-garde* (*Giacometti, Between Classic Modernity and the Avant-Garde*), planned for the Maillol museum (Paris) for September 14, 2018 to January 20, 2019, listed Despiau among the greatest contemporary sculptors and an influence on Giacometti.
[2] *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, Paris, April to October, 1925.
[3] Interview with Assia Granatouroff reported by Françoise Vrac (F. Vrac, *Charles Despiau,* thesis for the École du Louvre, 1976, unpublished, p.47/48.
[4] It is likely that two bronze proofs of this version that are known to us were cast posthumously, authorized by Mme Despiau.
[5] Cited in 1934 GUENNE
[6] 1945 ARTICLE.
[7] The proofs are marked C. Valsuani and are numbered “/7,” but one of them is numbered twice, 3/7 and 4/7. The proofs from his lifetime must have been cast before the autumn of 1939 because the Claude Valsuani foundry ceased all activities at that time and didn’t begin again until 1948, thus after Despiau’s death. As none of the provenances that have been established for these bronzes goes back before the Second World War, it’s likely that they are posthumous casts that were authorized and sold by Despiau’s widow.