



AUGUSTE RODIN (1840-1917)

Study for the Secret

Plaster, c. 1910-1917

Unsigned

H. 16.6 x W.6.5 x D. 6.5 cm (H. 12.4 cm without the base)

Provenance

- Madame Denis Clément (by family inheritance, c. 1950-1960)
- By inheritance

Selected Bibliography

- 1983 EXPOSITION : *Rodin, Les Mains, Les Chirurgiens*, Paris, musée Rodin, 30 novembre 1983 – 9 janvier 1984, n°77, p.109.
- 2007 LE NORMAND ROMAIN : Le Normand-Romain, Antoinette, *Rodin et le bronze, catalogue des œuvres conservées au musée Rodin, tome I et II*, RMN/musée Rodin, 2007, p.252 (sous La Cathédrale).
- 2011 MARRAUD : Marraud, Hélène, *Rodin, La main révèle l'homme*, Paris, éditions du musée Rodin, 2011.

"Rodin is the sculptor of hands (...)" Gustave Kahn, 1900

In his profuse creative activities, Rodin often worked from fragments of sculptures; particularly from 1900 on, when he was at the peak of his career, he frequently reused elements from his existing works. This practice grew out of his desire to reduce all to essentials and his interest in antique fragments. His studio was full of small "abbatis" or "off-cuts"[\[1\]](#) that he liked to select and

arrange together as his imagination suggested.^[2] The arrangements were sometimes made by joining pieces together, as in the *Study for the Secret*, which is composed of two identical right hands.

Rodin was fascinated by the expressive power of hands. Though the hands of his sculptures and his sculpted groups are always quite striking, contributing greatly to the expression of the work as a whole, he also created several compositions featuring hands in their own right. “Rodin [...] was able to impart to a single element of this vast, vibrating surface [the body], the independence and the fullness of a whole.”^[3]

Among his other works composed of hands, a group of two identical [left hands](#) (it was the hand of a pianist) echoes the model presented here. In this work, the fingers stand apart, letting the air circulate among them, creating an aerated feeling.

The isolated hands in this work evoke dance; in particular, they are reminiscent of Loïe Fuller’s hands when she was dancing, which can be seen in photographs.^[4] Rodin had a fervent interest in contemporary dance and made it a frequent subject of his studies. Put together, the two right hands create a symbolic composition. The one closing in on the other, they encompass a void, and seem to be a pendant to [La Cathédrale](#), another composition, often reproduced, composed of two right hands, though they are not identical. In the one work, the hands evoke a Gothic ogival arch; in the other, they symbolize the Secret.

The gesture, with the slightly pointed index finger, could also suggest that this hand is raised to lips in a sign to be silent. This gesture in relation to silence is also found, for instance, in [Silence by Auguste Préault](#) and [Étude du Silence by Louis-Philippe Mouchy](#) (*Study of Silence*).

This relatively small plaster is a study for the marble work [Le Secret](#), which is 89.5 cm tall. There are also two plasters of this larger work in addition to a cast by Alexis Rudier, which is held at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#). In the larger version, the two hands close in, not on a void, but on a box. The marble, which is held today in the Rodin Museum (S.01000), was shown in London in 1910 under the title *Hands Holding the Sacred Tablets*. With the box replacing the void between the hands, the effect of the work is quite different.

The smaller hands in this study are no less powerful than those in the larger version: “The hands [...] so precisely defined, completely free of sentimentality, seem disproportionately enlarged by a giant—this is how this man makes them—to his own measure. He is so great. Though he makes them very small,

as small as he can, they are still larger than life..."[5]

This plaster *Study for the Secret*, like the five plaster proofs in the Rodin Museum ([S6077-S4051-S1249-S3047-S5325](#)) is not signed. The hands are anchored to the red marble base by a layer of plaster, and vestiges of the seams resulting from the molding process are still visible.

Alexis Rudier began a bronze edition of the model in 1916, initially under Rodin's supervision, and then, between 1919 and 1958, under the supervision of the Rodin Museum, who worked first with Alexis and then with Georges Rudier. There are three proofs in American museums (New York, [Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art](#); San Antonio, Texas, [The McNay Art Museum](#); and Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art).

[1] Such off-cuts were the result of the molding of the work: "Protruding parts of a clay model that, because of their form or their position, had to be cut off and molded separately in order to facilitate the molding process. The off-cuts of a figure are generally the arms and legs; they're reintegrated, after molding, into the work as a whole." From *Sculpture, méthode and vocabulary*, éditions du patrimoine, 2000, p. 558.

[2] This practice is called *marcottage*: "the composition of a new sculpture, either entirely or partially, through the use of already executed works. The sculptor takes his own works apart and reintegrates them into a new work." From *Sculpture, méthode and vocabulary*, éditions du patrimoine, 2000, p. 549.

[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, Paris, éditions Émile-Paul Frères, 1928, p. 55-56.

[4] In 2011 MARRAUD, p. 56-57: Anonymous, *The Hands of Loïe Fuller*, 1914, silver gelatin print. Loïe Fuller choreographed a piece, *The Dance of Hands*, in which only the hands are lit, with the rest of the body remaining in shadow. As she explained it: "A hand separated from the body can express its joy, grief, or pain with as much perfection as the whole human form."

[5] Rainer Maria Rilke to Clara Rilke, September 2, 1902, in *Correspondance (Œuvres III)*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1976, p. 26.