

CHARLES DESPIAU (1874 - 1946)

Eve

Plaster d'état, with patina
79 x 26 x 18,1 cm

Provenance

- Artist's studio
- Private collection, France

This work is included under the number 2023-9P in the critical catalogue of Charles Despiau's work established by Elisabeth Lebon.

Bibliography for the half life-plaster

- 1923 ARTICLE : Deshairs Léon, « Despiau », *Art et décoration*, avril 1923 ; p.107
- 1923 ARTICLE : Magne Émile, « le sculpteur Charles Despiau », *Floréal,* n°31, 4 août 1923
- 1924 ARTICLE: Levinson, André, "Sculptors of Our Time: Examination of Some Points in Common," *L'Amour de l'Art*, November 1924, repr. P. 387.
- 1995 THESIS: Lebon, Elisabeth, *Charles Despiau (1874-1946), Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpted Work*, doctoral thesis in art history, under the direction of Mme Mady Ménier (Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne), 1995. Not published. This model is listed under the catalogue number 76-2P.

Exhibitions of the half life-plaster

- *Charles Despiau, sculpteur mal-aimé*, Beelden-aan-Zee Museum, Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, n°23 (plaster from the musée des années Trente (Museum of the 1930s) in Boulogne-Billancourt)

Eve is one of Despiau's major works; the model exists in half life- and life-versions. The work here is a plaster *d'état* (the model at one stage of its development) of the half life- version, which is to say, a working model reworked by the sculptor himself. It is very close to the definitive version. Despiau kept it in his studio.
Despiau worked for a long time on this figure, which he viewed as a spontaneous homage to the painter Douanier-Rousseau. He would have like to have seen it placed on the tomb of the painter when his remains were transferred to an individual plot in 1922. When he died in 1910, he had been buried in a mass grave for paupers.

The half- plasters
There are several plasters *d'état* of the figure in this . We are aware of three held in the following public collections:
*The Museum of Modern Art in Paris (inv AM 1269S)
*The Despiau-Wlérick Museum in Mont-de-Marsan
*The Museum of the 1930s in Boulogne-Billancourt; this one is very likely the original plaster that was used for the castings in bronze.

The half- bronzes
Between 1923 and 1925, Despiau had an edition of five proofs cast in bronze; currently we know of two of them in public collections:
*The Hamburger Kunsthalle (The Hamburg Art Museum) in Hamburg, Germany
*The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden-Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. (USA) (AN 66.1330)
There may also be an edition in terracotta, though at this time, we have not been able to locate a single proof. [1]
This original half life- version was enlarged to life- (190 cm) between 1923 and 1925. Several plasters in progress of this format are also known, and an edition in bronze was cast around 1925 (Alexis Rudier, founder). There are also five posthumous casts authorized by Mme Despiau in the mid-1950s (Georges Rudier, founder).

Text by Elisabeth Lebon

Elizabeth Lebon, "***Eve* or the birth of art",** *Charles Despiau, sculpteur mal aimé,* Museum Beelden-aan-Zee, Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Waanders Uitgevers,

2013, p131-146 :

Caught up today in this spiral that makes progress and speed the be-all and end-all of contemporary life, it is particularly hard to make the effort of staying long enough to allow the mind to understand in depth, which is what Despiau's work demands. Observation comes up against impatience. So it can be useful, just to help us revive that fertile pause, to linger over one of the works exhibited here. We felt the large *Eve* particularly appropriate for this exercise since it marks a turning point, not in the artist's production which we have said does not really develop in a linear way, but in his career. Why did a lover of American contemporary art as shrewd as Joseph Brummer donate it to the French State to allow Despiau to enter the Musée du Luxembourg, the temple to living artists in a France that saw itself as the center of the arts? In what way was this *Eve* so 'modern' that it was initially considered for the centre of the esplanade of the Palais de Tokyo at the 1937 Exhibition?
The subject is looked at endlessly from two points of view: as a female nude, it is part of a vast and tedious tradition. Designated as an Eve-sculpture, it joins the equally vast cohort of its kind. What can it have to show us that we haven't already seen, or heard? But this is precisely what is most interesting about it… For Despiau, sculpting a female nude is a way of renouncing the subject, in the sense of discourse: there is nothing more to be said either about the bodies of naked women or about an Eve represented hundreds of thousands of times. It is going to be about doing something else: creating sculpture. The body of the fertile woman serves as the perfect 'pretext'.
Let us follow the sculptor's work step by step. In 1922, the mortal remains of Henri Rousseau Le Douanier, who had been buried hastily twelve years earlier, were transferred to a more appropriate grave. Despiau then decided to work on a figure that he – in vain – tries to propose as a commemorative monument. Keen to achieve a new kind of sculptural invention to match that of the naïve painter, he proposed through a figure of the 'first' woman a return to the crystal-clear, primitive sources of his art. While Rousseau broke new ground in a revolutionary manner, with the freshness of ignorance, and achieved harmony through a precision of colour combined with the simplest of forms, Despiau proposes a sculptural interpretation in which colour was replaced by light. Inscribed within a simple cube-shaped block which the imagination can restore from the base upwards, the figure in planted solidly on thick slightly parted legs. Standing like a young plant (the body a firm and rigid stem on top of which the round mass of the face dangles like a ripe fruit), she combines with apparent naivety the candour of her pose with an impression of unpolished animalism, by the eradication of details and the subordination of the parts to a whole volume still inscribed within the imperceptible block of which we are nonetheless aware.

Although with her stocky proportions and the thickness of her joints she might evoke in principle the art of Maillol, this figure by Despiau differs from it in its rejection of a stereotypical idealization, a richer use of light, and a spirit that is in fact closer to observed reality, more human and less decorative. The clear frontality of the posture provided the best possible legibility, in the guise of apparent ingenuousness, and at the same time avoids rigidity. The arms form large oblique lines opening the planes. Like geometric axes creating space by indicating directions, they organize and give energy to the intrusion of volumes, all of which creates meaning. The right arm is raised. In a motion that reveals a belly offered sensually, it underlines the chest and finishes by indicating the face. The left arm, contained in an oblique, verticality from the set-back shoulder to the hand placed on the thigh, creates a dynamic transition from the back to the front. It brings the figure alive while encouraging the viewer to move round the sculpture. The accent of the right elbow bent into an acute angle is balanced by the left foot which in contrast forms a wide angle as it passes beyond the plinth.

This transition outside the frame creates a transgression that subtly breaks the rigidity of the composition. The triangular opening that it creates gives overall balance and forms a sculptural echo that balances the acute point delineated by the right arm. By this ‘simple’ play of directions deftly indicated, Despiau poses and lightens his figure, spiritualizes it and gives it meaning. His *Eve* freely offers her fertile belly, the central matrix. The moment of pose in which she is captured inspires every confidence in this peaceful gestation, and the movement of life is suggested by the slight misalignments. But the attention signposted towards the face indicates the crowning of the body by the mind.

The role played by light is crucial. Let us say before taking apart the mechanisms more precisely, that far from fighting shadows as it does in Rodin, light joins with it in a play of modulated caresses. It plays on the chiaroscuro mode like a musical score in which the slight assonant dislocations create the beauty of a crystal-clear melodic line. The connection of Despiau’s work with contemporary musical experimentations is clearly visible here. Despiau himself, who had learnt to play the violin and expressed constant pleasure in associating with musicians, insisted on the equivalences between his sculpture and music, particularly the art of the fugue, through the same concern for a rhythm that coordinates the passages, ensures the harmony of relationships and the impossibility of incompletion that characterizes music and the sculpted object alike (as well as dance). Despiau organized intimate musical evenings in his studio at which the singer Henriette Bozon (of whom he made a bust) was accompanied by his friend Edgard Varèse on the piano. But it is with Francis Poulenc and especially with Erik Satie that we will find the most visible correspondence. With Despiau this melodic sensation is built by a development, an extremely slow maturation, in which the position of each part is thought out, deliberate and determined according to its role in the general distribution of

light, in order to create a rhythm whose melody results from carefully ‘orchestrated’ imperceptible imbalances.

A brief comparative study of the first plaster model and the finished plaster cast will help us see better. While in the initial version, the belly is still a smooth surface, Despiau finally livens it up with very light re-touches that give a vibrant appearance to the surface of the bronze. Holding the light by barely detectable rises, they subtly catch the eye. The opposite process is used on the thighs, which in the final plaster cast takes on a much smoother appearance than in the initial version. The light is to glide over the curved volume. Barely stopped by the hollow of the pubis, it envelopes the hips in a roundness that ends above the navel. Fertility is thus expressed in a sculptural way.

The curiously small face exudes a sense of delicacy, spirituality, a calm that is both smiling and serious, contemplative indifference, the impression of an intelligence that acquires its serenity in the absence of any ‘pre-occupation’, of any history. The lowered eyelids suggest chastity, tempered by the irony of the sidelong glance that we can discern. This face that contradicts the provocation of the pose by its air of gentleness and self-absorption, introduces spirit into the piece’s animalism. Once again, the comparison between the two extreme states of the preparatory plaster casts shows the delicate working of shadow and light. In the final version, Despiau has changed the position of the face, still bent like a heavy ripe fruit, but which he turns ever so slightly to the left and tilts gently forward. The viewer’s perception is radically changed by this. The volume of the chin recedes and forms a clear crescent in the denser shadow of the neck. The forehead on the other hand, brought forward, receives the full intensity of the light. The oval of the face is stressed, whilst emphasizing the forehead, the seat of the mind, which hangs over and lights up the whole composition.

Other slight alterations to the face itself contribute to the transition from an initial inexpressive, flat and too delineated version, to a spiritualized head in which the curve still reigns supreme. The lock of hair that thickened the top of the skull is eliminated and Despiau returns to a hairstyle with the hair drawn back which emphas the shape of the cranium. The pad of hair behind the ears is eliminated, replaced by a mass that continues the outline of the ear, while small wisps of hair liven up the temple and sketch the beginning of the oval that the viewer’s eye will reconstruct around the face. The arc of the eyebrows, marked by rudimentary coils of clay, but above all lifted towards the top of the nose in the first version, is adjusted and restores the harmonious rounded aspect of the face. Finally the smile outlined too clearly in the first plaster model is reworked. The sculptor contents himself with reducing the corners of the mouth which he pinches forward to purse the lips, also reworking their profile in the round.

Starting off from an initial idea with no other value than to temporarily fix the large masses, Despiau proceeds with small successive touches, introduced very slowly, that gradually orient, construct and give meaning merely by their position in space. It needs only careful observation to recognize the

construction, to understand the arrangement of the volumes, the organization of their transitions, the distribution of the light, to appreciate the riches of this figure, outside any cultural precondition or any knowledge of an underlying theory. Anyone walking around the figure can see the same care that has guided every profile, accomplishing a fully thought-out and deliberate work of art, realized in its every dimension.

Despiau's *Eve* numbers among the masterpieces because, offering to the eye as it does an open sensuality dominated by the mind, she perfectly reflects the women of his time, busy winning their liberation; seeking to rediscover the naivety of the first creator, she also fully entered the concerns of the most invigorating artists of the time. But by deriving entirely from a perfectly timeless sculptural language, accessible to all, she can in the same way as a prehistoric Callipygian Venus or a Cycladic idol, be released from her time and connect with humanity as a whole.

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[1] The source of this information is a caption for a reproduction in *Charles Despiau – Hommage à Baudelaire*, musée des beaux-arts de Bordeaux, musée de Livourne, musée Despiau-Wlérick, June 2005 to January 2006, éditions le Festin, 2005, p.97