



EMILE-ANTOINE BOURDELLE (1861 - 1929)

Head of Apollo on a Square Base or Apollo in Battle

Bronze proof with brown patina with rich green nuances and partially gilded

Sand-cast by Alexis Rudier, probably between 1913 and 1925

Founder's signature (at the back of the base on the left): ALEXIS RUDIER FONDEUR
PARIS

Signed and dated (on the left side of the base in a cartouche): EMILE ANTOINE
BOURDELLE 1900

Note (in the lower part of the cartouche): REPRODUCTION INTERDITE
(Reproduction prohibited)

Monogrammed (under the right ear): B

67.3 x 23.7 x 28.2 cm

Provenance

- Henry Potez collection (1891-1981)
- Bailly-Pommery sale, Briest and Rieunniere, Paris, March 19th 1996, lot 3 (Henry Potez collection)
- Switzerland, private collection (Geneva)
- Sam Josefowitz collection (2000s)
- Sale, Christie's, Paris, October 21st 2023, lot 444 (Sam Josefowitz collection)

Selective bibliography

- Jianou, Ionel et Dufet, Michel, *Bourdelle*, 2nd English edition with a complete and numbered catalogue of the sculptures, Arted, 1978, n°266.

- Lenormand-Romain, Antoinette, « La Tête d'Apollon, la 'cause du divorce' entre Rodin et Bourdelle » ("The Head of Apollo, 'the cause of the divorce' between Rodin and Bourdelle"), in. *La Revue du Louvre et des musées de France*, n°3, June, 1990, p.212-220.
- *De Degas à Matisse, la collection d'art moderne du musée Toulouse-Lautrec*, Alès, Musée Bibliothèque Pierre-André Benoit, 2006, repr. p.19 (of the one in the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum).
- *Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929), passeur de la modernité (conveyer of modernity)*, Bucarest - Paris, *une amitié franco-roumaine*, exhibition catalogue, Bucarest, Romanian National Museum of Art, September 28, 2005 - January 24, 2006, Paris, Bourdelle Museum, repr. p.187 (of the one in the Bourdelle Museum, Inv. MB br300).
- Cantarutti, Stéphanie, *Bourdelle*, Paris, Art en scène, 2013, repr. p.101 (of the one in the Bourdelle Museum, Inv. MB br300).
- Barbillon, Claire, Godeau, Jérôme, Simier, Amélie, under the direction of, *Bourdelle et l'antique, une passion moderne (Bourdelle and Antiquity, A Modern Passion)*, exhibition catalogue, Bourdelle Museum, Paris, October 4, 2017 - February 4, 2018, repr. cat. 47 p.102 (of the one in the Bourdelle Museum, Inv. MB br300).
- Simier, Amélie, « Tête d'Apollon (1898-1909), 'Apollon au combat' », in. *Bourdelle et l'antique, une passion moderne*, exhibition catalogue, Bourdelle Museum, Paris, October 4, 2017 - February 4, 2018, pp.100-115.

Sources

- Antoine Bourdelle, "Apollo in Battle," October, 1928, Bourdelle Museum archives, [MB d.5927\[1\]](#)
- Antoine Bourdelle, "Apollo in Battle," September, 1929, Bourdelle Museum archives [\[2\]](#)

My dear daughter, I'm giving you (...) the large bronze of the "Head of Apollo" (...) which was so important to your father.

Extract of a letter from Cléopâtre Bourdelle to her daughter, Rhodia, March 2, 1964 (in the archives of the Musée d'Orsay).

The *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* from 1909 is the definitive model of a long creative process that had its origins in an 1898 study of a *Head of Apollo* in terra cotta. The artist ran across the work again in his studio a couple of years later and reworked it several times between 1900 and 1909. The various forms that the *Head of Apollo* took during this period show that Bourdelle was experimenting with verticality and with the force of the gaze, but above all, they also trace the evolution of his own creative emancipation as a sculptor.

The developmental stages and experiments in composition

Around 1900, Bourdelle ran across an earlier work, the *Head of Apollo in Crazy Clay*. Though lost today, this work is known through a [photo](#) from the period,[\[3\]](#) and, thanks to an impression that was taken of piece, a record of it remains as a [Fragmentary Mask](#), dated 1900. Bourdelle dedicated the plaster of it to Rodin and gave it to him in 1909.[\[4\]](#) This [Fragmentary Mask](#) was later editioned in bronze. Then the artist added a neck and photographed the plaster in his studio at several different times.[\[5\]](#) [Head \(or Mask\) of Apollo with Neck](#) was also editioned in bronze. Around 1909, Bourdelle removed the neck, transformed the mask into a head, leaving a visible crack on the left side of the face, and audaciously posed it directly on top of an imposing architectural base. It is this version, considered "definitive," that we're presenting here. Finally, he created a [Head on a Small Base](#) in 1925; there is a bronze edition of that version as well.

The early part of the twentieth century—the years in which he was evolving the *Head of Apollo*—was a transitional period in Bourdelle's life. He participated in the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900, then fell ill from exhaustion after creating the Montauban monument, and then separated from his first wife. Everything was pushing him toward an artistic rebirth, and the *Head of Apollo* was the result. It is in a sense, his manifesto, as is made clear in two texts that he wrote on the work a while before he died.[\[6\]](#) He gave the date of 1900 to the definitive 1909 version of the *Head of Apollo* as a recognition of this pivotal point in his artistic development.

The "cause of the divorce" between Rodin and Bourdelle

In wrenching myself from Rodin, I tried also to rise beyond man to the God Apollo.[\[7\]](#)

Since at least 1893, Bourdelle had been one of Rodin's assistants. Rodin recognized and appreciated his talent, praising him in an article in the journal *Volne Smery* in 1909, on the occasion of the Bourdelle exhibition in Prague: "I love his sculpture, so personal; it echoes his sensitive nature and his passionate and spirited temperament."[\[8\]](#) On his side, as was the case for most of the people who collaborated with the great master, Bourdelle felt a boundless

admiration for Rodin, but realized that he needed to distance himself from him in order to find his own way: "I worked for him, spent a lot of time with him, and deeply admired him. But one who follows remains always in the rear. And so, I acquired all the science that I was able to acquire from others, and after digesting it, I focused on my natural learnings in order to remain myself."[\[9\]](#)

In 1909, Bourdelle quit working as Rodin's assistant, but invited him to come to his studio to see the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base*, which he called *Apollo in Battle*—in his words, "one of my most important works."[\[10\]](#) After that, their epistolary correspondence, which had been extensive, seems to have stopped. Bourdelle commented on this change, analyzing it much later in one of the two texts that he wrote on the *Head of Apollo*.[\[11\]](#) Here are several extracts:

... at this very moment I'm starting on my new project, Apollo.

... It's a time of great disruption. Audacity in the clay of my first large work, Rodinian preoccupation. I would work a few minutes a day on his large Eve in stone. Now and then, I would get a commission for a bust, bronze or marble. Having shaped too much wet clay, my hands were swollen. I had to paint and do portraits in pastel; that's what saved my health and my pocketbook.

But after I'd recovered from the monument,[\[12\]](#) Apollo galvanized everything pure in my deepest vision, and leaving all my earlier impulses behind, I finally got down to the form, beyond the blood, the bone, the cartilage, and the muscles of the human body to reach the ambient structure of its forces. I began a battle that was the opposite of Rodin's, but I used his admirable analytic weapons for the internal framework to universalize my conceptual design.

... Though I had forgotten it for many years, I found a study that I'd done at the age of thirty, completely dried up, crazed, and unfinished in a storeroom. Molded, saved, and cast in bronze, it meditates and fights in some private collections as well as in museums.

It is the drama of my life; one side done and the other unfinished.

Anxious, austere, concise, entirely free from the past, from any input not contemporary.

... When Rodin saw the plaster, he was struck. He saw the divorce already completed and would never forgive me...

Stylistically, one of Bourdelle's "first-ranking works"[\[13\]](#)

With this *Head*, Bourdelle arrived at a style based on large architectural planes. Reflecting on it, Rodin said, "For me, the big issue is modeling; for Bourdelle, it's architecture. I enclose the feeling in muscle, whereas with him, it surges forth through style."[\[14\]](#) And André Suares[\[15\]](#) added, "What joy (...) to find an

artist like you, with such a marvelous balance of gift and application, of instinct and intellect. You are both Greek and French and always an architect."[\[16\]](#) In Bourdelle's own words: "I seek out the essential in structures, and assign the more ephemeral to the background; I am always searching for the universal Rhythm."[\[17\]](#) In the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base*, the architectural aspect is underscored by the audacious composition, in which this head without a neck sits directly on an imposing base, and by the treatment of this base and the back of the head in terms of large geometric planes. While the face is magnificently modeled, revealing an overall harmony in its features, the base and the back of the head are treated in a much more raw, blunt fashion.

The planes, with their varying shapes and angles, are connected by their jutting edges, echoing the distinctly cubist style that was developing at the same time. Picasso did his *Head of Fernande* in 1909, and the back of the *Head of Apollo* seems to be stylistically related to the Cubists' approach. It works in counterpoint to the figurative face, like two variations on the same theme. Seen from that point-of-view, this approach shares some of the values and projects of avant-garde artists of the era, specifically its interest in the decomposition of motion (Futurism) and the perception of an object from several angles simultaneously (Cubism). In a different style, but with the same goal of offering a head-and-tail view in the same sculpture, Bourdelle had created a strange double-faced work, *Le Jour et la Nuit*, in 1900. It showed two faces side by side, like two faces of single piece. This radical gesture places the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* well within the spirit of Modernity. "It is significant that Bourdelle conceived this work while some of the theoretical tenets of Cubism were, with great foresight, being formulated by his friend, the critic Mécislas Golberg; he solidified the principle of the synthesis of forms, with which modern sculpture would be engaged throughout the following years."[\[18\]](#)

The somewhat rough, beaten-up, quality of the face is further evidence of the artist's originality. Following this new approach, Bourdelle, like an archeologist, resurrected a "damaged piece of a sculpture" and completed it, accepting the damage done by time as a part of it. Constructing this face by incorporating the cracks and splits of the original work gave him a powerful, raw expressivity; it was an approach that Rodin had already used. Particularly rough, the left side of Apollo's face includes a long fissure that was part of the original *Head of Apollo in Crazy Clay*.

This modern process of recuperation is superimposed upon another process that is turned toward the past. The archeological aspect, which integrates the marks of time, the patina, with its subtle gilded nuances, and the mythological theme of Apollo, presented in all his raw, calm force, takes us back to time immemorial and places this work within the classical tradition. In 1905, Elie

Faure described Bourdelle's return to the antique: " ... the figures that he has erected have a unified structure, the glory and the solidity of definitive Parthenons between the hard sky and the sea. But while they emanate the universal sense of the builders of the gods, their calm has been transformed into an ardent austerity."[\[19\]](#)

Apollo, the son of Zeus and L eto, is the god of the arts and of light and is the symbol of reason, calm, and clarity. Known for his great beauty, he is also the obdurate god who punishes all who defy him. He was both a hypnotizing musician and a fierce hero, and this duality is enacted in this sculpture, which displays a harmonious face on one side and a scarred one on the other, or even a figurative face on the front and an abstract one on the back. It's an illustration of Bourdelle's comment that "*It is the drama of my life; one side done and the other.*"[\[20\]](#) From a stylistic point of view, the work does not follow the codes of Greek art. Here, the figure of Apollo "would be the very incarnation of poetic inspiration, of the god who guides the artist by "creating" with him (in the sense of the Greek verb *poiein*). Elsewhere, the sculptor described the engagement in religious terms: "[...] I experienced a revelation by fire and a divine freshness both at once because I'd just realized that it was no longer I alone, as a poor and frail mortal, that guided the planes of clay, but that Apollo, friend of the dawn, determined and gentle, was working with me."[\[21\]](#)

In one of his two texts on the work, Bourdelle records that he used a young red-headed Italian as the model for Apollo's face.[\[22\]](#)

"... the 'Head of Apollo' (...) which was so important to your father"[\[23\]](#)

The two texts that Bourdelle wrote on his *Apollo in Battle* testify to his attachment to the work, testimony that is reinforced by his acute attention to its diffusion. Starting in 1912, he gave plaster proofs to some friends, including Andr e Gide, Elie Faure, Gabriel Thomas, and Anatole France. Later, he gave bronze proofs to Paul Vitry (in 1922)[\[24\]](#) and to Andr e Suar es (1926).[\[25\]](#) He showed the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* in large international exhibitions, including the New York Armory Show[\[26\]](#) in 1913 and the Venice Biennale in 1914. That same year, the work was acquired by the National Museum of Sweden in Stockholm.[\[27\]](#) Considering it one of his best works, Bourdelle closely supervised the castings and personally assured the quality of the patina, as this passage from a letter to Paul Vitry attests: "So they have finally brought me the first Apollo in Battle gilded (bronze). They brought it to me with the gilding over a green and black patina—and I, with my soldering torch, lit, applied additional patina over the gilding ... "[\[28\]](#). Our proof presents a richly

nuanced patina with a strong presence of gold leaves. It is comparable to the proofs held at the Orsay and Lausanne museums as well as at the Arts Institute of Chicago.

The edition

The locations of 15 proofs of the bronze edition of *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* are currently known. They were all most likely cast between 1913 and 1932.^[29] Based on a study of the founder's mark, it appears that the proof presented here was most likely cast by Rudier between 1913 and 1925. Comparative studies and consultations with experts in the field have shown that Rudier carved his mark in capital letters during this period.^[30]

Among the known proofs, ten are held in museums in Europe and in the United States: the [National Museum of Sweden](#) in Stockholm,^[31] [Salisbury House](#)^[32] in Des Moines, Iowa, [the regional Fine Arts museum](#) in Lausanne,^[33] [The Art Institute of Chicago](#),^[34] [The National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum](#) in Athens,^[35] the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi,^[36] the [Musée d'Orsay](#),^[37] and the [Bourdelle Museum](#)^[38] in Paris. A proof of this work is extremely rare today. A manifesto on its own and shown in all of the artist's important exhibitions, the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* possesses all the architectural power, raw beauty, and creative audacity that distinguishes Bourdelle's art.

This proof was held in two renowned collections:

*Henry Potez (1891-1981), one of the most important French aeronautics engineers of the interwar period, was also an art lover and collector. We don't know yet in what circumstances he became the owner of this proof of the *Head of Apollo*, which was sold during the estate sale of his collection in 1996.

*Sam Josefowitz (1922-2015) was a collector from Lithuania, who moved to Switzerland in 1930. He made a fortune in the United States in the vinyl industry. Specialized in French art of the end of the 19th century, he became the owner of the *Head of Apollo* after 1996.

A major work, shown in every important exhibition, *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* showcases the powerful architecture, the raw beauty and the audacious creativity featured in Bourdelle's art.

^[1] *Bourdelle and Antiquity*, 2017-2018, p.103: "It seems to be seven pages from a discourse given during the artist's large retrospective exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels." November 3, 1928 - January 6, 1929.

^[2] *Bourdelle and Antiquity*, 2017-2018, p.103: "small illustrated book of thirty-five pages, at times crossed-out (...) dated (...) several days before the sculptor's death (...) which supplied the information for the later accounts of

the rupture between Rodin and Bourdelle ... "

[3] Antoine Bourdelle, attributed to, *Head of Apollo in Crazy Clay*, c. 1900, taken from a gelatin silver bromide negative on plate glass, Bourdelle Museum.

[4] Antoine Bourdelle, *Mask of Apollo*, 1900, plaster, H. 32 cm, dedicated "To the great master Rodin," Paris, Rodin Museum, [Inv S.02842](#).

[5] In. *Bourdelle and Antiquity*, 2017, p. 108-109.

[6] "Apollo in Battle," October, 1928 and "Apollo in Battle," September, 1929, Bourdelle Museum archives.

[7] Extract from a letter written by Antoine Bourdelle to his friend, the writer André Suarès, in André Suarès and Antoine Bourdelle, *Correspondence*, presented by Michel Dufet, Paris, Plon, 1961, p. 55.

[8] Auguste Rodin, "Émile-Antoine Bourdelle," *Volne Smery*, 1909, #38.

[9] Bourdelle to an unknown correspondent, 1905 in Curtis, Pénélope, "The Letters of Émile-Antoine Bourdelle," *Archives de l'Art français*, new period, t. XXIX (1988), p. 171.

[10] "In Bourdelle's Studio," *Journal des Débats*, October 29, 1928.

[11] "Apollo in Battle," 1928.

[12] He was in the process of completing the Montauban Monument in 1900-1902.

[13] "In Bourdelle's Studio," *Journal des Débats*, October 29, 1928: "... one of my first works, and one of those that, for me, began to express what I wanted to convey."

[14] Campagnac, Edmond, "Rodin et Bourdelle d'après des lettres inédites" ("Rodin and Bourdelle According to Their Unpublished Letters"), *Grande Revue*, November 1, 1929, p. 16.

[15] André Suarès (1868-1948), French poet and writer, author of *Voyage du Condottiere* (1910, then 1932). From 1912 on, he ran *La Nouvelle Revue française* with André Gide, Paul Claudel, and Paul Valéry.

[16] Extract of a letter from the writer André Suarès to Antoine Bourdelle, in André Suarès and Antoine Bourdelle, *Correspondence*, presented by Michel Dufet, Paris, Plon, 1961, p. 57.

[17] "Apollo in Battle," 1929.

[18] Extract of *Six Leading Sculptors and the Human Figure: Rodin, Bourdelle, Maillol, Brancusi, Giacometti, Moore*, Athens, National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum, June 9 - October 4, 2004.

[19] Extract of the preface by Elie Faure to the catalogue *Exhibition of Sculptures, Paintings, Pastels, Etc. by Émile Bourdelle*, Paris, A. A. Hébrard Gallery, May 1905. See:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1173279b/f1.image>. Note: Plaster #1 in the exhibition was titled "Philosopher in Battle," 1900, never exhibited. It is thought that this is possibly one of the first states of the *Head of Apollo*.

[20] "Apollo in Battle," 1928.

[21] *Bourdelle and Antiquity*, 2017-2018, p. 115.

[22] A handwritten note in the Musée d'Orsay's file on the work indicates that he might also have used Dr. François Debat, the head of the beauty product company Innoxa. Debat was a pharmacist and founder of the journal *Art and Medicine* and free member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts—(painted by Despiau in 1942).

[23] Letter extract from Cléopâtre Bourdelle to her daughter Rhodia, March 2, 1964, Documentation du musée d'Orsay.

[24] Paul Vitry (1872-1941), curator and art critic who supported the purchase of *Hercules the Archer* for the Luxembourg Museum.

[25] See note 16.

[26] The work was sold to William Van Horne, a Canadian-American railroad magnate and art collector.

[27] Inv. NMSk 1077, donated anonymously in 1914.

[28] Extract of a letter from Bourdelle to Paul Vitry, January 12, 1922, private collection. In a second letter written on January 19, he added: "The bronze (...) was at Limay's [sic Limet's] for almost a year!!! and I had to finish the patina for you myself. (...) But it would have been a shame if such a piece—made precious not only by the gold leaf that covers it, but also by its tones, which are quite rare for gold—went into other hands than yours.'

[29] There are, in addition, another 2 or 3 proofs that have appeared on the art market in the past few decades.

[30] Among the proofs of the *Head of Apollo on a Square Base* that we have been able to see, there are two different founder's marks: one in capital letters (placed either to the left or the right on the back of the base), and the other in lower-case letters (on the right of the back of the base). The specialists in sculpture that we have consulted have told us that Rudier used the mark in lower-case letters beginning in the middle of the 1920s. For example, the proof in the Stockholm museum, which is pre-1914, carries a mark identical to that on our proof, which is to say, in capital letters.

[31] Inv. NMSk 1077, donated anonymously in 1914.

[32] Inv. 27.81, bought in 1929 by Carl and Edith Weeks.

[33] Inv. 50, legacy of Henri-Auguste Widmer in 1939.

[34] Inv. 1997.543, legacy of Florence May Schoenborn in 1997.

[35] Inv. 10450, gift of the Mmes. Bourdelle, 1949.

[36] Inv. MTL75, gift of (or bought from) Mrs. Dufet-Bourdelle in 1953.

[37] Inv. RF 4283, tax gift of Mrs. Dufet-Bourdelle in 1989.

[38] Inv. MB br300, legacy of Mrs. Dufet-Bourdelle in 2002. The museum also has two other bronze proofs, as well as the proof in original plaster. One of the bronzes is on loan at musée Ingres Bourdelle in Montauban (France).