

Auguste Rodin, *Le Baiser (The Kiss)*
Plaster, 23.5 in. (59.6 cm.)
New York Private Collection

A sculpture that shocked and transfixed the world, Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* scandalized polite society in America and Europe alike with a sensuality presented without artifice (Figs. 1–17).¹ First exhibited in Paris in 1886, the degree to which this piece became engrained in the collective psyche of the time cannot be overstated. The bronze that was sent to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago was placed out of sight and behind police guard, for fear of the effect on public morals. In fact, in subsequent decades *The Kiss* was featured on the covers of the most popular sex education texts.² The French critic, Léon Rioter, wrote that *The Kiss* captures “the precise moment when the strategy of love relinquishes its weapons for a honeyed reed and tender words, when strength and grace, each one by the other at last subdued, acknowledge their mutual abdication with their lips. It is only this, but it is all of this.”³

Like many of Rodin's most famous pieces, *The Kiss* was originally created as a group within the artist's monumental, and ultimately unfinished, *The Gates of Hell* project (Fig. 18). *The Gates of Hell* was commissioned by the French Directorate of Fine Arts in 1880 to serve as the entrance to a planned Decorative Arts Museum, featuring scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. The Decorative Arts Museum never materialized, and neither did *The Gates of Hell*. Rodin worked and reworked *The Gates of Hell* for thirty-seven years, until his death in 1917. In regard to his *opus*, he is said to have remarked in 1900, “What about the cathedrals? Were they ever finished?”⁴

The Kiss itself depicts the story of Paolo and Francesca as told in *The Inferno*'s fifth canto, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The noblewoman Francesca da Rimini falls in love with her husband's younger brother, Paolo, while they read the story of Lancelot and Guinevere (seen in the book in Paolo's hand in the subject sculpture). After they share a kiss, Francesca's husband, Giovanni, discovers them and kills them both. A second sculpture of Paolo and Francesca is featured in *The Gates of Hell* showing them descend to Hell—the damned lovers in eternal embrace (Fig. 19).

There are three full-sized versions of *The Kiss* in marble. One is at the Musée Rodin in Paris, another at the Tate Gallery in London, and the third belongs to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen (Figs. 20–22). The subject plaster was created for the premiere reduction bronze at the Barbedienne Foundry in Paris (Fig. 23). Barbedienne held an exclusive contract on the production of *The Kiss* bronzes from 1898 to 1918. During that time Barbedienne produced 319 bronzes in four different reductions.⁵ As the plaster from which all those issuances were cast, the subject work is likely the only one actually formed by the hands of the artist himself.

Research: M.S.

¹ J. F. Chabrun and R. Descharnes, *Auguste Rodin* (New York: Park Lane, 1967), 132–133.

² *Ibid.*, 133–135.

³ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵ H. de Roos, “The Barbedienne Example” (*Rodin-Web*, 2003).



Fig. 1

Auguste Rodin, *Le Baiser* (*The Kiss*)

Plaster, 23.5 in. (59.6 cm.)

Signed, *Rodin*

A Ferdinand Barbedienne foundry plaster for the premiere reduction
New York Private Collection



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*
Bronze, c. 1880–1890
250 x 157.5 x 33.5 in. (635 x 400 x 85 cm.)



Fig. 19

Auguste Rodin, *Paolo and Francesca*
Bronze, c. 1886
11.8 x 23.3 x 10.6 in. (29.8 x 59.1 x 27 cm.)
The Brooklyn Museum, New York



Fig. 20

Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*
Marble, c. 1882
71.5 x 44.3 x 46.1 in. (181.5 x 112.5 x 117 cm.)
Musée Rodin, Paris



Fig. 21

Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*
Pentelic marble, 1901–04
71.3 x 48 x 59.8 in. (182.2 x 121.9 x 152 cm.)
The Tate Gallery, London



Fig. 22

Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*
Marble, 1901–03
77.5 x 44.4 x 46 in. (191 x 113 x 117 cm.)
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



Fig. 23

Auguste Rodin, *The Kiss*, 1st reduction
Bronze, 1914–18
28.6 in. (72.7 cm.)
Private collection