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Ambitious Rodin Exhibit Pays a Visit to St. Pete

By Galina Stolyarova

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A cast of the grand-scale “Burghers of Calais,” above, will be exhibited at the Peter and Paul Fortress till Aug. 15.

ST. PETERSBURG — The art of Auguste Rodin, arguably the most sensual sculptor of all time, whose works emphasize the connection between the physicality and the spirituality of mankind, takes center stage at a vast display at the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg.

Titled "Rodin. From St. Petersburg to Moscow," the ambitious project, which brings bronze casts of some of the sculptor's finest works such as "The Kiss," "The Burghers of Calais" and "The Age of Bronze" to the banks of the Neva River, was conceived by the French art dealer and art historian Patrick Carpentier, founder of the Carpentier Art Gallery.

The French sculptor and artist François Auguste René Rodin was born on November 12, 1840 in Paris. He is often regarded as the founder of the Impressionist style in the art of sculpture.

Rodin's big break came in 1876 with "The Age of Bronze," also known as "The Vanquished." Rodin's model was a young soldier, whom the sculptor described as "a fine noble-hearted boy, full of fire and valor." The sculptor made a point of not using a professional model, as he sought to avoid exaggeration and artificial expression and strived to achieve natural harmony.

The exhibit, which showcases 42 sculptures and a series of drawings, will stay in town until the middle of August before traveling to Moscow.

Several works by Rodin will be displayed in the courtyard of the fortress, while most of the collection will be housed indoors, in the Atrium.

All the sculptures are second bronze casts, certified as original Rodin works. Carpentier collected the gypsum sculpture molds that Rodin produced, and then used them to make the second casts, with which he is now traveling the world. The project has been shown extensively across France and other European countries, and recently went to China.
The authenticity of each sculpture in the Carpentier collection has been certified by the Rodin Examination Committee in France. Under French law, a number of copies are allowed to be made of an original work of art, and their authenticity must be validated by a panel of experts authorized to issue authenticity certificates.

According to Carpentier, choosing a location for the St. Petersburg exhibit was a tough task. The grand-scale "Burghers of Calais" alone weighs about three tons, and it requires an appropriate setting.

A series of Rodin's drawings known as the "Fenaille Album" or the "Goupil Album" will also be on display. The book is a collection of Rodin's drawings originally published in a limited print run of just 125 copies in 1897 with a preface by Octave Mirbeau. The Fenaille name of the album refers to the collector Maurice Fenaille, who initially commissioned a group of photo engravers from the Maison Goupil to print this anthology, bringing together 142 of Rodin's color wash drawings. The majority of the drawings were inspired by Dante's Inferno, and they are generally known as the "black drawings."

The Dante connection is essential to understanding Rodin's art. The iconic sculpture "The Kiss" — which looks set to become the focal point of the exhibit — was influenced and inspired by the poet's seminal work, "Divine Comedy." The sculpture "The Kiss" depicts the tragic love story of Paolo and Francesca, described in Canto V of the Inferno, in which Dante and Virgil meet the illicitly enamored couple in the Second Circle of Hell, where carnal sinners who subordinate reason to desire are punished.

The story of Paolo and Francesca has a historical background, and it is believed that Dante, as a young man, was deeply moved by the story of the couple. As the historical account has it, in 1275, Francesca, daughter of Guida Vecchio da Polenta of Ravenna, was married to Giovanni Malatesta, son and heir of the Lord of Rimini. This was a marriage of convenience that was arranged for political reasons. Francesca found it impossible to become emotionally attached to her husband, who was physically disfigured, and she soon fell hopelessly in love with his extraordinarily attractive younger brother Paolo. The doomed lovers were killed by Giovanni in a fit of jealousy in 1285, when Dante was 17 years old. The story received significant resonance, and seemingly had a major impact on the young poet.

According to Svetlana Risunova, the event's Russian co-organizer, the project's ideologists are considering presenting a gift to the State Hermitage Museum in the form of one of the sculptures from the exhibition.

"Rodin. From St. Petersburg to Moscow" runs through Aug. 15 at the Peter and Paul Fortress. St. Petersburg. Tel. (812) 230 6431. www.rodininrussia.ru

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