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OPENING ADDRESS: RODIN AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES,

King George VI, Art Gallery, Port Elizabeth.

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I am honoured that you should have asked me to open this exhibition of a famous and much-travelled collection. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation that these sculptures and drawings, of eminent historical and artistic significance, are visiting the Eastern Cape again after an interval of eleven years. The collection is in fact larger than it was in 1965 and is now called Rodin and His Contemporaries.

However, I intend no disrespect to the reputation of his contemporaries and his students when I say that the primary interest of the exhibition lies in the works of Rodin himself.

I can safely assume that you have invited me, a layman in these matters, to open this exhibition as a compliment to the University I represent and to the city where it has its seat. The history of Art, with a capital A, in Grahamstown begins with Thomas Baines who arrived in March 1848 by way of

Port Elizabeth. Grahamstown was to be his headquarters for five years. The greater part of these years was spent travelling and painting. On his expeditions he spent each day to the full drawing in pencil or painting in water-colours - never a day without a line - and on his return to his base, his room in Potter's Inn, he painted in oils, So far as we know, art classes were started in Grahamstown a hundred years ago when a lady rode from Fort Beaufort specially to teach the citizens how to paint. This led to the establishment of a School of Art in 1880 which became part of the Rhodes University College in 1925. The association between the City and the University in the Fine Arts has always been close and fruitful and the high reputation of The Grahamstown Group shows that this continues to be the case.

We are told that it is by no means a rare phenomenon for the reputation of an artist who has enjoyed success and fame to fall into a period of comparative obscurity. Thus Rodin's

art fell temporarily from favour for nearly thirty years after his death, and it was not until about 1965 that there was what may be called a 'Rodin revival'. The first sign of this revival can be seen in England, where, for example, a full-fledged exhibition was staged in 1953. This was followed shortly after by one in New York, and new assessments began to appear in book form. It was not until 1962 that Paris at last honoured him with an exhibition at the Louvre. It is significant, and a cause for wonder, that it should have been left to England to begin the process of re-instatement of a French sculptor, the greatest since Michelangelo. However, this is consistent with the denial of a national funeral in France and the holding of a memorial service in St. Margaret's, Westminster, at which members of the Royal Family were represented.

If during the period of neglect, Rodin was assessed at all, it was as a competent, traditional

and unoriginal sculptor who had executed such worthy bronzes as The Age of Bronze and The Thinker. By some, his outlook was dismissed as 'academic'. There is some truth in this. Rodin was an eclectic. As one of his biographers and re-valuers has written:

'To see the matter in its proper perspective we must remember that in Rodin's period an artist was ~~not~~ haunted by the fear of seeming to lack originality and was in no way shy of basing himself on his predecessors ... by the same token, it was perfectly in order for an artist to look back to the past and derive inspiration from the great masters.'

There is no doubt that the examples of Donatello and Michelangelo are behind his best work, at least up to the zenith of his career. He then deliberately turned to Greek and Hellenistic ideals, asserting that it would have been quite wrong to have started, as a beginner, with the Antiques. To do so makes

the beginner 'die an old scholar but not a man.' And he underlined that the sculptor must work from Nature and then study in the galleries. Rodin is full of paradoxes. Most of them are perhaps the consequence of the complexity of his character. He was a sensual and passionate man whose emotions tended often to overrule his by no means inconsiderable intellect. He was passionately involved in mankind, in the human problem. One of the paradoxes of his later years is that, while drawing most of his models and artistic principles from the canons of classical art, he responded to a wide range of aesthetic experiences, and, in doing so, showed his alertness to new trends. Another paradox, amounting almost to an ambivalence, was that he was both a conservative and a rebel. The image generally presented nowadays is that of a rebel. It has been suggested that in their zeal to legitimize him as the ancestor of modern sculpture his admirers single out certain aspects of his art

for praise while conveniently overlooking others. The better view seems to be that in many ways his modernity was grounded in the conservatism of his time and that it did not spring from an imagination which was oblivious to the style and subject-matter approved by the pontiffs of contemporary academic art. This view is supported by one of his many secretaries who put the sculptor's estimate of his position as follows:

'He never claimed that he had introduced anything fresh but that he had re-discovered what had been long lost by the academicians. The Greeks had preserved it, and so had the Gothics. But in the official art of the day it was entirely lacking. His contribution ... was therefore an act of restoration.'

If he was more conservative than insurgent, it is nevertheless true that much of his modernity rests upon his belief that the artist must devote his life to empirical discovery for and of himself.

This empiricism, which denied the possibility of conforming to impersonal norms, was the trait above all others that prevented Rodin from being an academician and a consistent conservative.

These characteristics of the great sculptor have much to teach us, not only with regard to art, but more widely in the manner in which we live our daily lives, approach our work, treat our fellow men or organise our regional and national affairs. Like Edmund Burke, he was conservative in so far as he wished to preserve things that were worth preserving, but he was able to look beyond the reigning orthodoxies at things as they are, not as the authorities would have them be. His passion for going back to the original sources of tradition and cutting away later, inessential accretions was a strong characteristic. In our South Africa to-day, where the need for change is so urgent, would that sculptors, artists or poets imbued with the vision and passion of Rodin

arise to enable us to see ourselves and our cherished shibboleths in a fresh, new light.

He has been called 'a modern sculptor in spite of himself' and 'the Moses of modern sculpture ... (who) like the biblical Moses lived only long enough to look on the Promised Land.' The author of this otherwise apt comparison hastens to point out that it was 'not his death but his steadfast adherence to naturalism and certain of its traditions (that) prevented Rodin from entering into the new territories that were being surveyed and colonised by younger sculptors of the twentieth century.'

Whether he was predominantly conservative and traditional or an insurgent and innovator, whether he was essentially a great statue maker both in his monumental groups and in his portraits or a great sculptor, will continue to be argued about

by critics. He was a man, and we must take him for all in all. He was a man of deep compassion and understanding whose sympathy was reserved for the whole of life and humanity. He was a man of Renaissance breadth and versatility whose like we have not since seen. He was a humanist in every sense of that term, not least in that man is in the centre of the stage of his artistic productions. In the final analysis Rodin's work has a powerful human appeal and a transcendent capacity to uplift. We look at it as Wordsworth did at Nature, unless we are insensitive to all such influence, 'hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity.' Rodin once declared that his profession should 'bring within reach of the multitude the truths discovered by the powerful intellects of the day!' Such great truths have been brought within our reach, and possibly within our grasp, here and now.

Mr Director, I now have pleasure in declaring this exhibition of Rodin and His Contemporaries officially open.