



Rainer Maria Rilke, Rose Beuret, and Auguste Rodin in the garden at Rodin's home in Meudon, France, 1906. Photo Albert Harlingue. Courtesy Musée Rodin, Paris.

From Disciple to Master

by Lilly Wei

RACHEL CORBETT

You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin

New York, Norton, 2016; 320 pages, 22 black-and-white illustrations, \$26.95 hardback, \$15.95 paperback.

For those who have sensed a kindred soul in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, the debut book of Rachel Corbett, an editor at *Modern Painters*, will be an informative, sometimes troubling read. *You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin* is an exhaustively researched tale about the hot-and-cold relationship between the poet and the sculptor, two of the most admired artists of the twentieth century. Corbett remarks that few who read Rilke's posthumously published 1902–08 letters to Franz Xaver Kappus, first addressed as a nineteen-year-old neophyte poet seeking advice, realize that Rodin was the source for a number of their key sentiments about cultivating self-trust and a rich inner life as a way to mitigate existential despair.

Rilke, then just twenty-seven and an emerging poet himself, had been in Paris for approximately a year when his correspondence with Kappus began. Born and raised in Prague, Rilke had served stints in a military academy, a German prep school, and a Prague university that he quit to go to Munich. He then traveled to Italy, Russia, and the artist colony in Worpswede, Germany, establishing a lifelong pattern of travel in search of inspiration, better health, and suitable working conditions. He was drawn to Paris by the great sculptor, then around sixty, about whom Rilke planned to write a monograph. Intent on learning from Rodin the secrets of creativity and life, especially how to observe keenly, Rilke eagerly jotted down all that the master said, helped the great man in any way he could, and eventually became his live-in secretary. Efficiently rescuing Rodin's studio from its state of perpetual chaos, he was nonetheless unceremoniously sacked by the volatile artist for "presumptuously" writing to two of his patrons. Deeply hurt, Rilke felt his actions were unjustly interpreted. The rupture never fully healed, even though the pair later reconciled—but by then Rilke's infatuation had cooled.

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Writing in a lively, fluid style, Corbett deftly alternates chapters about the two figures, beginning with Rodin. A study in opposites, the blunt, robust sculptor and the introverted, neurasthenic poet are presented in separate narrative strands that eventually entwine and then unravel, as Rilke's reputation rises while Rodin becomes a living monument of little interest to the avant-garde. After relating Rodin's protracted death, Corbett succinctly wraps up the last nine years of Rilke's life, which included an unexpected exile from Paris for the duration of World War I and impressment, at age thirty-nine, into Austria's military service, where he was tasked with hand-ruling sheets of paper. In many respects, although Rodin is the focal point, the book is about Rilke and the impact that Rodin had on him, the sculptor framed by the poet's acute, probing sensibility. A parable about genius and the shifting balance between disciple and master, it details the transition from adulation to criticism as the acolyte outgrows the master's tutelage, freeing himself to find his own artistic identity. Inevitably, Rilke grew disenchanted with the aging sculptor, whom he felt had compromised the original purity of his creative force, becoming too carnal, too commercial, and too corrupted by worldly success.

AMONG THE WOMEN in Rilke's life was the brilliant, fiercely independent Lou Andreas-Salomé (a rejecter of Nietzsche's repeated marriage proposals, a friend and student of Freud), whom he met when he was twenty-one and she thirty-six. Even after she terminated their amorous relationship, she remained his confidante and muse; it was Andreas-Salomé who cannily persuaded Rilke to change his name from René to Rainer. Clara Westhoff, the German sculptor he met while at Worpswede, married, and had a daughter with, also remained close to him, despite their mostly separate lives. As Corbett notes, Rilke took Rodin's prescription "work, always work" to heart, abandoning all else, including comfort and familial duties in often guilty pursuit of the solitude necessary to create, an austere regimen that relaxed somewhat near the end. Among his last lovers was Baladine Klossowska, a painter and the mother of two gifted sons. One of them was the precocious Balthasar, better known as Balthus, whom Rilke befriended, recognizing his talent, their bond maintained until the older man's death.

The author's sympathy for the women surrounding the two protagonists is well-founded. She remarks pointedly on Rodin's infamously "predatory" gaze and behavior, and calls Rilke's view of women "inconsistent," his professed feminism "tinged with hypocrisy." Her characterization of Andreas-Salomé as a femme fatale—

cum-intellectual powerhouse is more positive than most, and she outlines the early twentieth-century gender restrictions that frustrated Westhoff as well as the gifted painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, a close friend of Westhoff's and Rilke's from the Worpswede days. (Rilke treated Modersohn-Becker shabbily when she was in Paris and needed support; his long poem *Requiem for a Friend*, written a year after her untimely death at thirty-one, is both a lament and an apology of sorts.) Corbett also gives a brief, un-sensationalized account of sculptor Camille Claudel, artist-partner in Rodin's most notorious affair. Rose Beuret, his long-suffering but tenacious mistress of more than five decades, is also described with consideration. When he finally married her, she died of pneumonia within two weeks of the nuptials. Rodin succumbed to a lung infection nine months later, on November 18, 1917; evidently he couldn't survive without her. They were buried side by side under a cast of *The Thinker*.

Corbett discusses the artistic projects that Rodin and Rilke were each involved in, emphasizing the ventures they undertook in the period they were together and noting the long gestation period for much of Rilke's work, including his only novel, the semiautobiographical *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). She also recounts anecdotes about their working processes. When making a portrait bust, for instance, Rodin required multiple sittings to model various clay versions of the subject before arriving at a definitive image. While some of his eminent subjects—Pope Benedict XV, for instance—balked at the time required, playwright George Bernard Shaw relished his extended time with the sculptor, joking in an essay that future dictionaries would list him as "Shaw, Bernard: subject of a bust by Rodin; otherwise unknown." She also retells how the reverberant opening line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* came to him as the ghostly whisperings of the wind sweeping around the castle of his patron, Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis—which is one way to be jolted out of writer's block, even if the elegies weren't completed until a decade later, in 1922.

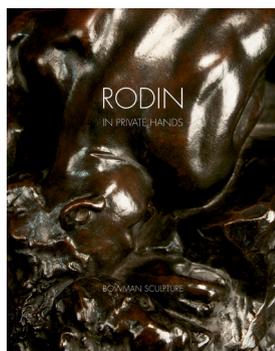
Corbett draws an evocative picture of Paris at the turn of the century through the beginning of World War I. She offers us glimpses of its bustle, crowds, and myriad enticements as a hub of finance, culture, and the arts, but also reports on its grime, poverty, and crime. The Hôtel Biron (now the site of the Musée Rodin) is conjured as a storied bohemian enclave, where Rilke and then Rodin were both in residence, with amusing cameos of a number of its other free-spirited tenants, such as Edward Steichen, Isadora Duncan, and the flamboyant actor Édouard de Max.

The celebrated thespian was brought there by another tenant, his friend Jean Cocteau, who later said that he wished he had known it was Rilke's lamp that he saw burning at night like a beacon.

Appalled by Rodin's last years and what the more ascetic poet considered his unseemly ways of warding off his fear of death, Rilke—acutely aware of his mortality due to a lifetime of illness—refused to be vanquished by dread as he approached his own demise. He insisted that his precarious condition was caused by piercing his finger with a thorn while gathering roses, the rose a recurrent motif in his work.

He denied the diagnosis of leukemia that is usually given as the cause of his death, at fifty-one, on December 29, 1926, in Switzerland. Balthus, according to some, attended the funeral, heartbroken, and afterward—in Corbett's words—“wept in the mountains for days.” Twenty years later, Balthus published Rilke's correspondence with him as *Letters to a Young Painter*. Thus Corbett is able to end by coming full circle. Written over the years and telling Balthus some of what Rilke learned from Rodin, the letters restate why a life in the arts matters—and why all artists must have tenacity, courage, and belief in themselves. ○

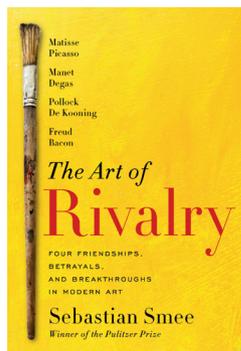
Books in Brief



BEN HUNTER and
ABBY HIGNELL
**Rodin:
In Private Hands**

French artist Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) is renowned for expressive bronze sculptures like *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*. His lesser-known works, many equally compelling, are the subject of this richly illustrated catalogue, which accompanied an exhibition of the same name at Bowman Gallery in London. Art historian David Ekserdjian contributes a foreword.

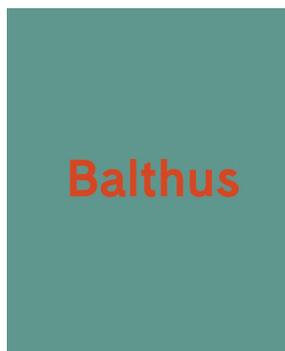
London, Bowman Sculpture, 2016; 272 pages, 277 color illustrations, \$75 hardcover.



SEBASTIAN SMEE
**The Art of
Rivalry:
Four Friendships,
Betrayals, and
Breakthroughs in
Modern Art**

Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic Sebastian Smee details a history of modernism contingent on intimate relationships between major artists. The competitive friendships of Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, and Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon motivated them to create boundary-pushing works.

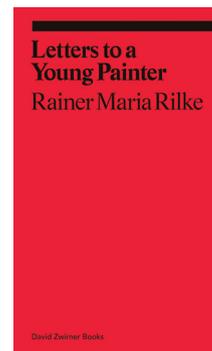
New York, Random House, 2016; 416 pages, 4 color illustrations, \$28 hardcover.



OLIVIER ZAHM, ed.
Balthus

This catalogue, produced on the occasion of an exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Paris, chronicles Balthus's career through reproductions of his often unsettling portraits, street scenes, and landscapes. A conversation between fashion writer Olivier Zahm and Balthus's widow, Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, provides insight into the reclusive painter's world.

New York, Rizzoli, 2016; 126 pages, 68 color illustrations, \$100 hardcover.



RAINER MARIA RILKE
**Letters to a
Young Painter**

This little-known correspondence with a teenage Balthus complements Rilke's famous *Letters to a Young Poet*. Writing toward the end of his life, between 1920 and 1926, Rilke reflects on his career and mortality as he encourages the up-and-coming artist. The book includes an introduction by Rachel Corbett.

New York, David Zwirner Books, forthcoming October 2017; 64 pages, \$12.95 softcover.