

A Formal Analysis of Auguste Rodin's *The Hand of God*

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Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) modeled and carved his series of sculptures called *The Hand of God* between 1896 and 1907. Among the three known marble versions, I am going to analyze one, which was purchased directly from Rodin himself by Samuel P. Colt of Rhode Island. After his death it was purchased by the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum and is currently exhibited in this museum in Providence, RI.

Rodin's *The Hand of God* is a sculpture of a right hand which seems to be modeling a pair of human figures, one male and one female, from a clod of earth. The hand itself emerges from a block of roughly chiseled marble. When I look at a picture of the sculpture, it reminds me of my illustration class professor. He used to say that the human hand is one of the most expressive organs. Just looking at the hand gesture in a painting or an illustration, you can tell a lot of the story. Certain hand gestures express our love and friendliness and certain other gestures might get you into trouble! I myself really agree with him when I think of the whole language that can be created with hand gestures, for example, sign language.

The sculpture of the big right hand has a smooth surface and curvilinear forms for every muscle and the skin of the hand, making us believe that it is alive and real. The way it holds the molding earth, it seems natural to think a sculptor is at work. The rough, unfinished side of the earth is resting on four fingers while the finished part of the smooth portion is facing upward to the artist himself, and the thumb is slightly touching the surface, as if it is gently and carefully smoothing the surface. All these gestures of the hand give us a feeling that it is in motion and in the process of making those human figures. The contrast between the look and feel of the underworked roughly chiseled portion, the smooth shining luster of the hand and the emerging forms of two human bodies not only emphasizes the subjects themselves but it differentiates between the nature of the medium and the skill and craftsmanship of the sculptor himself.

The choice of marble as the medium for this particular piece is perfect in many senses. The color of the marble appears as milky white, representing not only purity and the divine but also life and birth. The contrast between the texture of the rough earthly matter and the smooth and beautifully modeled figures demonstrates a relationship between the lifeless form of a stone and a form that is organic and full of life. Looking at the brightest light reflection on the edge of the fingers and the top of the muscles or nerves provides the form with beautiful, curvilinear lines that define the shape from the rest of the medium. It seems to me that the big rough

marble on the bottom and the hand are slightly away from the vertical center, but this is somehow counterbalanced by the two human figures and the rest of the clod of earth. This gives the final form an asymmetrically balanced look and weight which is held in this space easily and naturally. To Rodin and his community of believers around the world, this sculpture must have a deep meaning and very powerful message. Regardless of the message he intended to express, all we know for sure is that it is a representation of God's creation of human beings. As the name by which the sculpture is widely known suggests, the big right hand represents God creating the first two humans in the world, Adam and Eve. Maybe Rodin wanted to remind his people who created them or maybe he wanted to give them a feeling that they live in the presence of God!

Whether one agrees with the representation or the symbolism of the sculpture is very much dependent on one's social, cultural and religious background. As a Tibetan myself, I come from a country in Asia where 99% of the population follows Buddhism. As Buddhists, we don't believe in God's creation but rather self-creation through evolution. Thus, the way I look at the sculpture and the message that I receive may be a little different. To me, it represents the idea that we all came from Mother Nature. Just as Rodin skillfully carved the marble into organic forms, we all came into life with the perfect condition of Mother Nature. It seems to me as though the hand itself, as it emerges from the marble and gives life to the struggling human figure, is a representation of the cycle of life. We were formed from nature and we give birth to a new generation; when we die, we will disappear into nature itself. It also reminds us how nature has provided us with life and how this circle of life will remain vital to future generations. Rodin's *The Hand of God* is an inarguable example of design concepts of the 20th century in which minimalism was the most powerful influence, not only in the art world, but in the lifestyle of everyday human beings. It is simple in terms of color and form but with a huge meaning and impact on the audience even to this day. Rodin's *The Hand of God* can be many things to many different people, but we can decisively conclude that it has not only worked in the past but continues to inspire many artists to follow in his footsteps. It is a masterpiece from the past, which can transcend the gap between generations and stand firmly as an inspiration to the creative world of the past, present and future.

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