

During the summer of 2013 Art Collections Registrar Laura McCarty and Digital Collections Archivist Susanne Belovari unraveled the provenance of one of the most intriguing objects in the Permanent Collection, the bronze *Despair* by Auguste Rodin. The sculpture was gifted to Tufts in 1967 and since then it has not left the Medford/Somerville campus. A small brass plaque that had been attached to the stone base of the sculpture read “Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carl J. Gilbert-Brought from the Rodin Atelier by Mrs. Abigail Adams Homans, mother of Mrs. Carl J. Gilbert.” The objectives of McCarty and Belovari’s research were to establish a history of ownership, identify a casting date, and confirm its authenticity. The research revealed a fascinating story that starts with a young girl called Hitty.

Born in 1879, Abigail “Hitty” Adams was the youngest child of John Quincy Adams II (1833-1894), himself the great-grandson of President John Adams and Frances Crowninshield Adams (1839-1911). She was raised in the Boston area and at the age of 15, with the death of her father and the illness of her mother, she came under the guardianship of two uncles—Henry and Brooks. At the time, American historian and writer Henry Adams was living the life of a globe-trotting widower, spending summers in Paris and winters in Washington D.C. Ten years earlier, in 1885, his wife Marion Hooper Adams (known as Clover) had been found dead of an apparent suicide. Although he never remarried, Adams did embark on a close relationship with Clover’s friend, Elizabeth Cameron. Like Henry, Elizabeth was from a family with strong political connections and she, too, traveled frequently to Paris. Their relationship is well documented in the correspondence that the pair exchanged over a period of almost 40 years.

In 1894 Hitty wrote to her uncle suggesting that she might travel with Clover’s brother, Edward Hooper’s family, to the Washington area, where she hoped to stay at his house. She received the following response:

Dear Hitty

I am enormously pleased that one of my own nieces should at last think it worthwhile to make me a visit. Come along and stay for a month! Never mind waiting for the Hoopers! I am pretty stupid and the place is pretty dull, but I guess we can have a good time.

Affely ys

Henry Adams

In her book *Education by Uncles* (published in 1966), Hitty went on to say “Poor man, he little realized what he was letting himself in for and that from that time up to his death, twenty three years later, I should be continually popping in and out of his house.”¹

Henry Adams had recently become aware of the French artist Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, where two works in bronze were displayed, a single *Burgher of Calais* and the *Bust of Dalou*. Adams quickly became instrumental in introducing Rodin to American buyers and eventually established a personal rapport with the artist. On August 30, 1895 Henry wrote to Elizabeth Cameron “I am going, as a last resort, to Rodin and try to buy one of his small bronze figures. They are mostly so sensually suggestive that I shall have to lock them up when any of the girls [his nieces] are about, which is awkward; but Rodin is the only degenerated artist I know of whose work is original.”²

Later, Adams traveled to the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, where Rodin mounted an exhibition of his work at the Pavilion de l’Alma that featured everything from drawings to works in plaster and bronze. Here, Adams bought the marble *Psyche* for his niece Louisa Hooper, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The exhibition at the Pavilion de l’Alma marked the first time that Rodin displayed a working version of his masterpiece *The Gates of Hell* (completed posthumously). The monumental door was based on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and had been commissioned by the French government in 1880. Ultimately, Rodin worked on the *Gates* for 37 years. Although it was to have been finished in 1885, it was not cast until 1919—two years after the artist’s death.

Given the difficulty presented by their massive size (over 20 feet high) and the fact that the clay models dried and crumbled over time, the artist began to preserve the models for individual figures in plaster and bronze. The Tufts bronze, based on a figure originally called *Shade Holding Her Foot* (known as *Despair/Désespoir* after 1900), may have been one such component. The figure appears to have been conceived first in sketches of the early 1880s then underwent several changes before being incorporated into the *Gates of Hell* by about 1890. *The Bronzes of Rodin: Catalogue of Works in the Musée Rodin*, volume 1, published by the Musée Rodin in 2007, includes images and descriptions of several different versions of *Despair/Désespoir* and although each sculpture features the figure of a woman holding her foot, each version is slightly different.

McCarty and Belovari quickly identified a version of the sculpture (in the collection of the Musée Rodin) cast in 1902 that appeared to be similar to the Tufts bronze in form, size, and markings. Coincidentally, 1902 was also the year that Elizabeth Cameron and Henry Adams helped Henry Lee Higginson broker a deal with Rodin for the purchase of two marbles and three bronzes—the first substantial group of Rodin’s sculpture for an American collection.

As soon as they identified 1902 as a possible casting and purchase date for the Tufts bronze, Archivist Susanne Belovari began poring over the bound volumes of the Letters of Henry Adams found in Tisch Library Special Collections. The search was fruitless. Given that fewer than half the letters to and from Henry Adams had been published, Belovari’s research expanded to include a search of the Adams Family Papers in the archives of the

¹ *Education by Uncles*, Abigail Adams Homans (The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1966).

² *Letters of Henry Adams* (Letter from Henry to Elizabeth Cameron August 30, 1895 Paris). Massachusetts Historical Society.

Massachusetts Historical Society. There, in the microfilm reels of unpublished letters from Elizabeth Cameron to Henry Adams, Belovari was able to piece together the details of the purchase of *Despair/Désespoir*.

On February 8, 1902, from Paris, Cameron wrote to Adams: "I must begin another letter at once to tell you what I forgot yesterday. Which is that I ordered your *Désespoir (femme)* from Rodin the other day when I went to visit to see him...He had so many new things—at least new to me and says that he is in the working mood and that things are going splendidly. But Mr. Higginson's bronzes have been a little delayed for some technical reason I could not quite understand, I suppose it doesn't matter." Several weeks later, on March 31, 1902, Adams sent a letter to Cameron authorizing her to withdraw \$5,000 francs from a trust fund (presumably Abigail's) to pay for his bronze and to take it away with her. However, it would not be until October 7, 1902 upon completion of the three Higginson Bronzes, that Adams (who was then in Paris) reported to Cameron that all four bronzes were finally packed and being shipped to America.

In 1907, Adams's niece Hitty married the Boston lawyer Robert Homans (1873-1934) and eventually *Despair/Désespoir* passed from Hitty to her daughter Helen, born in 1913. Helen Amory Homas was active in medical research at the Harvard School of Public Health during WWII. She went on to a life dedicated to public service and was awarded an honorary degree by Tufts University in 1976. She married Carl Joyce Gilbert, a U.S. Trade Representative and the chairman of the board of Gillette Safety Razor Company and in 1967 the couple gave the Rodin bronze to Tufts University.

In September 2013, McCarty and Belovari forwarded copies of the letters and documentation to the Comité Auguste Rodin in Paris, which corroborated the findings with their own research. A photograph of the authenticated Tufts bronze will be included in the forthcoming *Catalogue Critique de l'Oeuvre Sculpté d'Auguste Rodin (Critical Catalogue of the Sculptural Works of Auguste Rodin)*.

- Laura McCarty