AUGUSTE RODIN

SAINT JEAN-BAPTISTE

Salon in 1880 (Plaster, orginal size) (1878)

Reduction n° 3

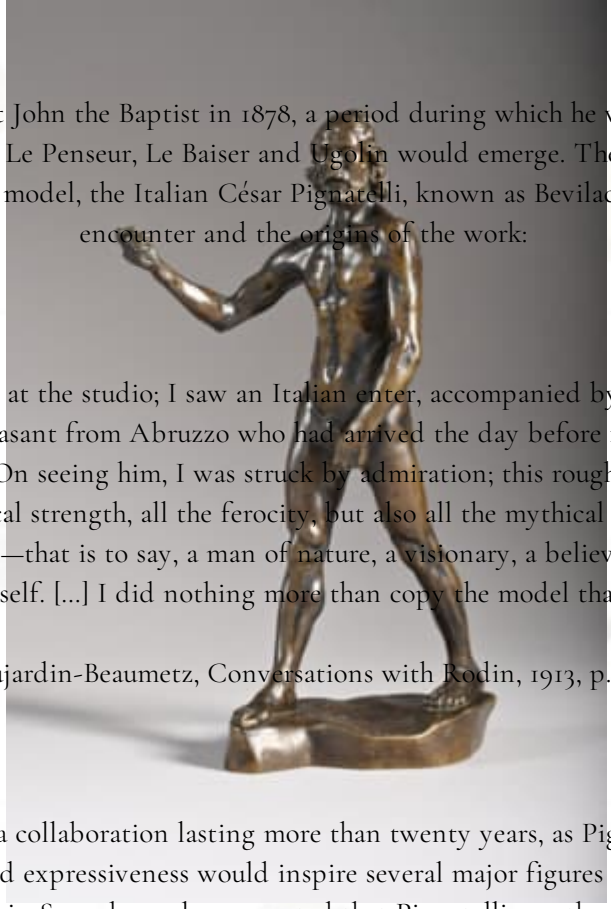
Bronze, richly dark brown patina

H: 19,6 cm L. 12,5 cm D. 5,3 cm

Lifetime cast signed «Rodin», old cast and edition by Thiébaut with the engraved mark «Thiebaut frères, Fumière et Gavignot Successeurs» (purchase of the funds and Thiébaut rights by Fumière et Gavignot in 1898), edition of 4 examples, this one probably the first, maybe the second, cast in 1899 (prime account from February 4th to December 9th 1899), stamped «200» under (Sale price 200 frs ?) and engraved «4» (number of casts ?)

Cast in 1899

Provenance : Sotheby's Sale New-York (October 6th 1989), former Knoedler and Co Collection.



Rodin began work on his Saint John the Baptist in 1878, a period during which he was also conceiving La Porte de l'Enfer, a vast project from which Le Penseur, Le Baiser and Ugolin would emerge. The idea for the work came naturally to the sculptor when he saw his model, the Italian César Pignatelli, known as Bevilacqua. Rodin himself recalled this encounter and the origins of the work:

'One morning, there was a knock at the studio; I saw an Italian enter, accompanied by one of his compatriots, who had already posed for me. He was a peasant from Abruzzo who had arrived the day before from his native land and had come to offer his services as a model. On seeing him, I was struck by admiration; this rough, unkempt man expressed, in his bearing, his features and his physical strength, all the ferocity, but also all the mythical character of his race. I immediately thought of Saint John the Baptist—that is to say, a man of nature, a visionary, a believer, a forerunner who had come to herald one greater than himself. [...] I did nothing more than copy the model that chance had sent my way."

Dujardin-Beaumetz, Conversations with Rodin, 1913, p. 65

This marked the beginning of a collaboration lasting more than twenty years, as Pignatelli quickly became Rodin's favourite model. His physique and expressiveness would inspire several major figures in Rodin's oeuvre, such as Ugolin and some of his Bourgeois de Calais. Some have also suggested that Pignatelli was the model for Matisse's Le Serf (1900-1903); the latter certainly painted his portrait in 1903 (Portrait of Bevilacqua). The plaster cast of Saint Jean Baptiste was created larger than life, standing over 2 metres tall - no doubt in response to the accusations of casting from a mould that had marred the reception of L'Age d'Airain the previous year - and exhibited at the Salon in 1880 (n. 6691). The following year, Rodin exhibited the bronze version, which was acquired by the French State and is now at the Musée d'Orsay.

On 4 April 1898, Rodin signed a ten-year edition contract with Fumières et Cie, the successor to Thiébaut Frères, for Saint Jean-Baptiste. Three smaller versions were produced: 80 cm, 50 cm and 20 cm. Our Saint Jean-Baptiste is one of only four examples of this third-scale version - two of which were produced in 1899 and two in 1903 - and is most likely the first, given the simple engraved inscription of the caster rather than a stamp. Another cast was acquired directly by the American collector Alma de Bretteville Spreckels (1881–1968) through the dancer Loie Fuller (1862–1928); she exhibited it at the Palais de la Légion d'Honneur in San Francisco, which she founded in 1924, as soon as it opened. In Paris, the Musée Rodin holds an example of reduction n. 2, as well as the plaster cast (now stripped of its head and arms to become L'Homme qui marche).

Through the exquisite finesse of its modelling and the sensitivity of its chiselling, our Saint Jean-Bapstite evokes the splendour of Renaissance bronzes. Here, Rodin depicts his subject nude, without his traditional attributes, thereby embodying the prophet's asceticism. His finger raised towards the sky evokes his preaching in the desert. Rodin thus reinvents a traditional iconography by offering a more direct, powerful and almost brutal interpretation of the figure, endowing it with unprecedented expressive force and striking musculature. A seminal work of modernity, it profoundly inspired artists of subsequent generations, notably Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), as evidenced by the annotated books, postcards and photographs of the work found in his studio.

We thank David Oakey, Curator in Charge of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco for providing details about the example from the Museum.