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JULES MASTBAUM'S GIFT TO THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia was the first city in the United States to exhibit works by Auguste Rodin. In 1876, the French artist sent eight of his early sculptures to the Centennial Exposition in Fairmount Park, the event commemorating one hundred years of American independence and which led to the founding of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His work was awarded no medals and the press made no mention of the young sculptor, leaving Rodin disappointed by his American debut. He had no idea the city would one day house one of the greatest single collections of his work outside of Paris.

The Rodin Museum and its vast collection are in Philadelphia thanks to one of the city's great philanthropists, Jules Mastbaum (1872-1926). A product of Philadelphia public schools and a graduate of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, Mastbaum began building his fortune in real estate. By the late 1890s he turned his attention to the emerging motion picture industry, opening his first movie theater in 1905 at the southeast corner of Eighth and Market streets. By 1920, the Stanley Company of America---named for Mastbaum's brother who died in 1918---was the largest operator of movie theaters in the United States.

Mastbaum embraced his role as a "movie mogul," becoming well known in the sports world as a breeder of thoroughbred dogs and indulging his appetites while traveling the world in grand style. It was while visiting Paris in 1923 that Mastbaum discovered the works of Rodin. As the story goes, Mastbaum was captivated by the small bronze sculpture, *Hand*, he saw in a shop window not far from what today is the Musée Rodin. He bought it, discovered the name of the artist, sought out more work, and an obsession was born. The Rodin Museum is the product

of that obsession, fulfilling Mastbaum's desire to form a fully representative collection of Rodin's work as both a sculptor on an intimate scale and also the maker of great monuments.

Rodin himself had died in 1917, willing his estate to the French government and giving permission to make casts of his works after his death. Mastbaum began buying bronze casts directly from the Musée Rodin in 1924, and by 1926 had acquired most of the works in the Paris museum's collection. Some of the bronzes had been cast during Rodin's lifetime; others, however, were cast especially for Mastbaum. *The Gates of Hell* is the most notable example. Although Rodin worked on its vast panorama of figures for the last 37 years of his life, this masterpiece had not been cast before his death. In 1925 Mastbaum ordered two casts, the first for the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia and the second for the parent institution in Paris, which was then in dire financial straits. His commitment to Rodin went beyond collecting sculptures---he also contributed funds for the rehabilitation of Rodin's home and studios in the forest of Meudon, just outside Paris, which were in disrepair in the 1920s. In return for his generosity, the French Government presented Mastbaum with six of Rodin's plasters.

While the sculptures were arriving at the port of Philadelphia, Mastbaum went to work creating a building designed specifically to house the number of works in his collection. He approached landscape architect Jacques Gréber of Paris, who had conceived the overall design of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, who sited the museum on the Parkway and designed the garden layout, while the local firm of Paul Philippe Cret, a fellow Frenchman and professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, created designs for the museum building. (Cret was concurrently designing the house and gallery of Dr. Albert C. Barnes in the nearby suburb of Merion.) Among those who worked on the project was the young Louis Kahn, a student of Cret who would go on to a career as one of the 20th century's most influential architects. Kahn's widow Esther recalled that he proposed to her within the walls of the Rodin Museum.

Mastbaum's proposal to erect and maintain the Rodin Museum was formally accepted by the Commissioners of Fairmount Park on May 12, 1926. Unfortunately, he died suddenly on December 7, 1926, before construction had started. His widow, Etta Wedell Mastbaum, saw that his dream became a reality by completing the building and transferring the collection to the City of Philadelphia, with the provision that the City assume responsibility for its maintenance. The Museum was finally opened to the public on November 29, 1929, in the presence of, among

others, Paul Claudel, the French ambassador to the United States and brother of the sculptor Camille Claudel, who had been Rodin's lover. Over the years, several important works have been added to the collection. They include the original plaster *Eternal Springtime* (1884), which the Rodin presented to the writer Robert Louis Stevenson in 1885, and a rare cast of *The Athlete* (1901-04), which was a gift from Mastbaum's friend Samuel Stockton White III, who had served as the model for this sculpture.