

Life & Times Exhibition

Rodin and the Art of Ancient Greece

*The British Museum, London,
26 April 2018 to 29 July 2018*

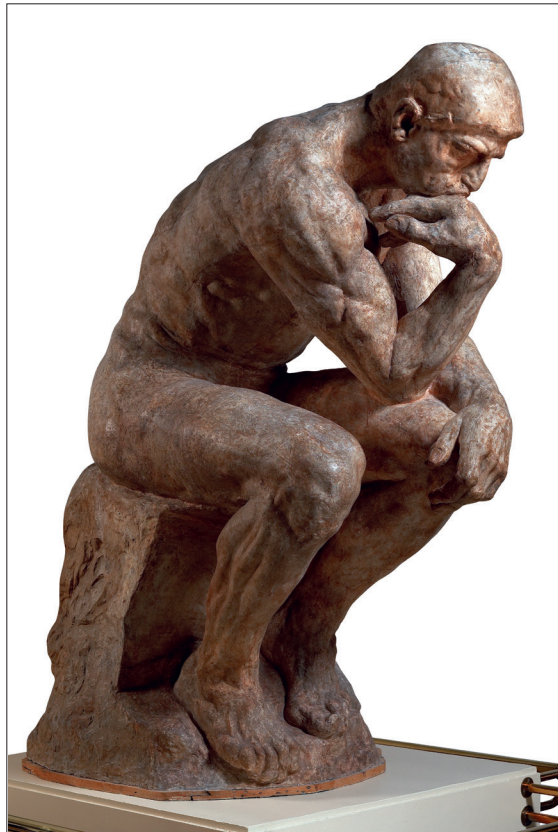
ICONIC BEAUTY

Entering the British Museum is to take a journey back to the ancient world and witness treasures upon which our civilisation is built. The Foster and Partners-designed Great Court, the spectacular covered quadrangle thronging with tourists, analogous to the Roman Agora, leads to the physical and emotional calm housing the Rodin exhibition.

Set on one floor in a large warehouse-like building are sumptuously and thoughtfully lit sculptures, drawings, and works from Rodin directly alongside their inspiration – the *Parthenon Frieze* and sculptures of ancient Greece.

You are initially greeted with a video of the master himself at work, bits of marble flecking his beard as he closes his eyes and uses basic tools to create iconic works of beauty. It was at the age of 40 that Rodin (1840–1917) first went to the British

The Thinker. © Musée Rodin (photo Christian Baraja).



Museum and saw the *Parthenon Sculptures*, or the *Elgin Marbles* as they were controversially called, and from them took inspiration to capture movement, life, and love in marble.

Rodin received his first major commission in 1880 to design *The Gates of Hell* (*La Porte de l'Enfer*). Meant to be delivered in 1885, Rodin worked on this project on and off for 37 years, until his death in 1917.

Having seen them in their native Rodin Museum outside Paris it was delightful to have the gates unpicked here with fine details on each of the figures. However, the big draws are the marvellous *The Kiss* and, of course, *The Thinker*.

Completed in 1903, *The Thinker*, a plaster piece, depicts the first ideas of a healthy mind in a healthy body. Indeed, 'By choosing to depict *The Thinker* as a strong, athletic figure, Rodin conveyed that the act of thinking is a powerful exercise.'¹

It also shows a man in active pursuit of the truth, or, with his chin resting on the back of the hand, an ancient Greek gesture of mourning, reflecting the tragic and sad nature of the human condition.

The work is amazing in its anatomical detail, which depicts both movement and stillness, with us, the watcher, a voyeur into secret moments. The *Parthenon Sculptures* are also displayed



The *Elgin Marbles*, now known as the *Parthenon Sculptures*. North frieze cavalcade. © The British Museum.

in a much more sympathetic repose than their usual spot in the Museum, allowing the detail created by Phidias in 432 BCE to be appreciated and understood in this modern context.

The whole exhibition was a delightful and skilfully designed appreciation of an artist and his muse.

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REFERENCE

1. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Looking to write, writing to look. 2019. http://www.philamuseum.org/booklets/12_71_137_0.html [accessed 11 Feb 2019].