Rodin, Vigeland and the Middle Ages

An antimodern path towards modernity?

Marthje Sagewitz
PhD candidate in art history, Universität Leipzig

Sagewitz’ 2016 MA-thesis examines the references to medieval art in the work of Auguste Rodin, focusing in particular on the Burghers of Calais. Sagewitz was a research assistant at the German Center for Art History Paris (DFK Paris) from 2017 to 2019. She is currently working on her PhD project exploring references to medieval art in Third Republic sculpture. She has held a scholarship from the Evangelisches Studienwerk since summer 2019 and is a guest scholar at the DFK Paris for the academic year 2019/20.

marthje_sagewitz@web.de

Abstract
In his search for an effective form for his famous Burghers of Calais (1884–1895), Auguste Rodin seems to have looked at medieval models. The emotional expressiveness of medieval sculpture also inspired Gustav Vigeland who refers in his early works to Rodin’s Burghers in “medieval dress”. This article aims to compare Vigeland’s references to medieval art with those of Rodin and to examine their recourse to the art of the Middle Ages in the socio-political and historical context of their time.

Keywords
Auguste Rodin, Gustav Vigeland, Middle Ages, national identity, cultural heritage, (anti-)modernism

Sammendrag

Nøkkelord
Auguste Rodin, Gustav Vigeland, middelalderen, nasjonal identitet, kulturell arv, (anti-)modernisme

He is a Gothic. […] For him, like the Goths in their most beautiful figures of the late thirteenth century […] moral expression is entirely made up of gesture […] In shaping his Burghers of Calais, Rodin has lived the life of the ‘Grands Ymagiers’ of the ancient tombs and cathedrals. […] And he has done it with such boldness, with such newly found modernity.

Félix Jeantet

The decisive influence of Gothic art on Auguste Rodin’s Burghers of Calais (1884–1895) (ill. 1) – now, as then, admired as the epitome of modern sculpture – was remarked upon by contemporaries of Rodin such as the above quoted art critic Félix Jeantet and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who worked for Rodin as a secretary from 1905 to 1906. They both proclaimed him a direct descendant of the “grands ymagiers”.

Gustav Vigeland consistently denied having been influenced by Rodin, but certain references seem undeniable, especially in his early work.

Three of Vigeland’s sculptures seem to refer explicitly to Rodin’s Burghers...
Ill. 1

Ill. 2
in “medieval dress”. Both the male figure of the group *Accursed* (1891) (ill. 2) and the *Worker* (1893) (ill. 3) as well as the two *Beggars* (1899) (ill. 4) exhibit formal parallels with Rodin’s *Burghers* and correspond to the work’s intellectual foundations, the image of man and the projection of emotive interiority.

The following paper seeks to compare Vigeland’s references to medieval art with those of Rodin and aims to examine the recourse of these two sculptors to medieval art in the socio-political and historical context of their time to discuss their works as contributions to contemporary debates about national identity. Until recently, modernist art and nationalist movements have often been presented as ideological opposites. A number of studies have proposed a broadening of the concept of modernity as well as a re-evaluation of existing categories such as avant-garde and traditionalist or modern and anti-modern.4 Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsh demonstrate how the search for national identity that inspired artists all over fin-de-siècle Europe correlated both with the recourse to primitive/medieval artistic traditions and the emergence of modernity.5 By concentrating on the Norwegian artist and contemporary of Vigeland, Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929), Patricia G. Berman shows how artists at the turn of the century combined the will towards an international progressiveness with a commitment to vernacular folk-art tradition.6 Penelope Curtis highlights the simultaneous presence of different kinds of modernisms by comparing the sculptures of Aristide Maillol with those of Rodin.7 The historian Benedict Anderson used the term of “antimodern modernism” to describe the response of artists torn between the imperatives of modernity and the search for national identity.8 Following this approach, the present article will argue that the artistic involvement of Rodin and Vigeland with medieval art is not only a form of patriotic romanticism but also an alternative expression of modernism.

![Ill. 3](image1.png) **Ill. 3**

Gustav Vigeland: *A Worker*, 1893. Bronze, 35.9 x 17.2 x 15.3 cm. Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet. Photo: Nasjonalmuseet.

![Ill. 4](image2.png) **Ill. 4**

Gustav Vigeland: *The Beggars*, 1899. Plaster, 73.6 x 42.8 x 47.5 cm. Oslo, Vigelandmuseet. Photo: Vigelandmuseet.
Rodin and the medieval – between fascination and patriotism

Rodin's fascination with medieval architecture and sculpture is reflected on various levels. In 1914, he published *Les cathédrales de France* which he richly illustrated with his own drawings. This book is a collection of notes written by the artist during his numerous travels to the French cathedrals from 1877 onwards. Rodin's written impressions are not only the result of an artistic approach to medieval architecture and iconography, but also evidence of a serious awareness for the preservation of the French cultural heritage. Like Victor Hugo before him, Rodin called for the protection of medieval buildings while he was explicitly opposing the restoration campaigns of the architect and theorist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879). From the 1840s until his death, Viollet-le-Duc was commissioned by the state with major restoration projects like that of Notre-Dame de Paris. Thus, he both contributed to a renewed medieval revival in France and had a decisive influence on the image we have of these buildings today. However, his restoration concepts, which sometimes included massive interventions in the building’s structure and sculptural décor, also received harsh criticism.

Rodin's private collection of medieval art testifies to his pilgrimages to the French cathedrals. These artworks should be considered as potential sources of inspiration, even if the collection emerged rather late, from the early 1890s onward. This lateness was not due to a lack of interest but to the artist’s financial struggle in the early years of his career.

The influence of late-medieval sculpture

In 1884, Rodin was commissioned by the city of Calais to make a monument honouring Eustache de Saint Pierre and his five companions – Jean d’Aire, Pierre and Jacques de Wissant, Jean de Fiennes, and Andrieu d’Andres. During the Hundred Years War, in 1347, after the city of Calais had been under an English siege for almost a year, these six sacrificed their lives to the English king Edward III in return for his promise to spare the rest of the city. The timing of the monument project – only a few years after the Third French Republic had replaced the Second Empire under Napoleon III in 1870 – was not accidental. In the aftermath of the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1871), the young Third Republic needed to consolidate its power, inspire patriotism and establish a French national identity based on republican values. The republican government resurrected historical figures from the medieval past that offered a strong identification potential and encouraged the creation of public monuments.

In his monument dedicated to the Burghers of Calais, Rodin seems to have been inspired by medieval sculptures. He commented later on the influence of medieval art on his œuvre: “The study of Gothic art has unquestionably influenced my sculpture, giving me [...] more depth, more life in my modelling. [...] The influence has entered into my blood, and has grown into my being.” Neither Rodin’s personal comments nor the archive of the Musée Rodin in Paris allow us to identify specific medieval sculptures as models, but there are several motifs in medieval iconography that probably inspired him, such as different representations of Christ: particularly noteworthy are the Crucifixion, Christ in Distress and Christ Carrying the Cross. Late medieval representations of these motifs around the passion of Christ are characterized by extreme expressions of suffering. During his travels through France Rodin could study several of these depictions, such as *Christ in Distress* in the Abbey of Saint-Remi in Reims or the fragment of the *Crucified Christ* originally placed on the base of the famous *Well of Moses* by Claus Sluter in Dijon. He probably saw other examples in the Louvre and the Musée de sculpture comparée. Finally, the medieval life-size crucifix in Rodin’s collection, hanging over the artist’s bed in Meudon (ill. 5), illustrate his deep
admiration for both the realistic and emotive aspects of the late medieval representations of Christ; an admiration that dates back to his years of apprenticeship in Belgium in the early 1870s.¹⁸

In the *Burghers of Calais* especially the pain-distorted face of Pierre de Wissant (ill. 6, detail) has a likeness with the suffering expression of the late-medieval representations of Christ. Rodin was probably also influenced by the realism in the depictions of the wounded body of Christ in the 15th and 16th centuries. He seems to have adopted this strong realism to create the figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre (ill. 1, detail), depicting a body exhausted by hunger and age.

Seen from behind, the *Burghers* recall the image of Christ Carrying the Cross, in particular the figures of Eustache de Saint-Pierre and Andrieu d'Andres, with their upper bodies bent forward (ill. 6). The similarity was noticed by contemporaries: the art critic Gustave Geffroy described the *Burghers* as “bourgeois Christs” and their path as a “Via Crucis”.¹⁹ As Christ carrying his cross on his shoulders, the bodies of the two *Burghers* seem to be burdened, although they do not bear any physical load. In their case the weight of their sacrifice, the willingness to die for their fellow citizens, is invisible. Another major source of inspiration were the mourners of the tombs of the Dukes of Burgundy in Dijon and the Duke of Berry from the 15th century. See footnote 16. Rodin’s private collection holds a remarkable example of the latter tomb.²⁰ It seems that Rodin was particularly influenced by the highly emotional expression on the faces and the mourning gestures of these figures. Similar to the medieval masters, he used the clothes of his *Burghers* as another vehicle to express their emotions.
A national monument or heroes of modernism?

Rodin’s choice to dress the *Burghers* in a “Gothic robe” can be explained by his admiration for medieval art, but it can also be understood as a political statement, as an artistic contribution to the patriotic visual culture of the Third Republic. By gifting the citizens of Calais with his *Burghers*, he honoured the city with a patriotic monument of “national style,” as Rodin himself defended it against critics. He emphasized the French character of the Gothic: “The Gothic is the history of France, it is the source of all our genealogies.” He proceeded later: “Our French cathedrals are superior to the English and German ones by the greater sculptural expression.” Herein, Rodin comes into line with tendencies in contemporary French art history that were significantly shaped by Émile Mâle. Although a French origin of the Gothic was vastly recognised at the end of the 19th century, art historians like Mâle vehemently emphasised the Frenchness of the Gothic and thus the superiority of the French génie. Mâle’s study *L’Art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France* (1898) is, besides its scholarly value in the field of medieval art history, exemplary for a nationalist interpretation of the Gothic in France at the turn of the 20th century.

However, Rodin’s reference to Gothic art may also be interpreted as more personal. Fin-de-siècle-France experienced multiple forms of medievalism proposed by different groups
and motivated by different intentions, both overlapping and competing with each another.\textsuperscript{25} While Rodin focused mainly on late medieval art, the medievalism of Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929) who worked for Rodin as an assistant in the late 1890s, rather refers to the Romanesque in order to emphasize the Romanesque heritage sites of his birth province, Occitania. By creating his medieval \textit{Burghers} Rodin broke with tradition and the established conventions of public sculpture.\textsuperscript{26} Instead of presenting the \textit{Burghers} on a pedestal, Rodin intended to place them at ground level, allowing the public to interact with the figures at eye level.\textsuperscript{27} Rather than portraying them as heroes, Rodin depicted the six men as individuals struggling with fear and anguish.

**Vigeland, the “medieval feeling” and the search for an artistic identity**

Exhibitions such as “Rodin og Norge” at the Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter (1998) and the more recent “Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and the Nordic Countries” in Stockholm/Helsinki (2015/16) showed that Rodin was known in Scandinavia since the late 1880s.\textsuperscript{28} The Norwegian painter Frits Thaulow (1847–1906) played a key role in establishing Rodin’s fame in Norway. He became friends with Rodin and was responsible for Rodin exhibiting five times in Kristiania, present-day Oslo, between 1891 and 1904.\textsuperscript{29} Scandinavian sculptors travelled to Paris to study Rodin’s work. Some even worked as his assistants, such as Finn Sigrid af Forselles (1860–1935), who participated in the production of his \textit{Burghers of Calais}.\textsuperscript{30}

Vigeland did not only travel to Paris, but also to Italy, Germany and the UK to visit current exhibitions and to study those artists who were considered pioneers of modern sculpture. Nevertheless, he has often been perceived as a solitary figure. Bo Wennberg and especially the recent exhibition “Parallels. Gustav Vigeland and his contemporaries” (2019) frames his work in a wider international context for the first time, placing him next to contemporaries such as Rodin, Bourdelle, Aristide Maillol and Albert Bartholomé.\textsuperscript{31}

When Rodin’s “bourgeois Christs” were discussed in the press, Vigeland was at the beginning of his career. Even though he did not travel to Paris until 1893, one of his first life-sized compositions, created in Copenhagen in 1891, already exhibits French influences.\textsuperscript{32} The multi-figured sculpture group \textit{Accursed} (ill. 2) reveals the juxtaposition of two different ideals of beauty. While the female figure and the two children still follow the Danish-Norwegian classicism, the central male figure is characterized by strong emotional expressions and a brutal realism in the depiction of the body, marked by deprivation and grief. Previous research has repeatedly identified Vigeland’s male figure as a direct descendant of \textit{Cain} by Fernand Cormond, represented in his historical painting \textit{Cain fleeing Jehovah’s curse} (1880). Immediately acquired by the French government, the painting was exhibited at the Musée du Luxembourg.\textsuperscript{33} Considering that Rodin was known outside France at the time, his \textit{Burghers} could also have influenced Vigeland’s male figure. Even though Vigeland could not have seen the original at that time (which applies to Cormond’s \textit{Cain} as well) he probably knew Rodin’s work through reproductions. By 1889, the year of the Paris World Exhibition, Paris had become a popular destination for Scandinavian artists who wanted to study modern art.\textsuperscript{34} While some artists, such as the above-mentioned Thaulow and af Forselles, settled permanently in Paris, others exhibited in the Parisian salons, but eventually returned to Scandinavia with numerous impressions and reproductions of art works from the French capital. One of them was the Danish sculptor and later professor at the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen Vilhelm Bissen (1836–1913) who exhibited at the 1889 Paris World Exhibition.
and might have seen Rodin’s *Burghers* at the Gallery Georges Petit (1889) on that occasion. It seems possible that Bissen acquired reproductions that Vigeland might have seen while he was working in Bissen’s studio in 1891. There is a likeness between the bent, forward-striding figure of the weakened *Eustache de Saint-Pierre* (ill. 1, detail) and Vigeland’s male figure. Even though the elderly *Burgher*, in contrast to Vigeland’s figure, stares expressionlessly at the path in front of him, Rodin’s group offers a range of other facial expressions, for instance *Andrieu d’Andres* who has leaned his torso forward and tries to cover his face with his hands, and *Pierre de Wissant* (ill. 6, details) who grimaces with pain.

Vigeland repeated the theme of the bent, slowly advancing emaciated male body twice in the 1890s. He may have studied Rodin’s *Burghers* for both *A Worker* (1893, ill. 3) and *The Beggars* (1899, ill. 4), as he travelled to Paris in January 1893 and made Rodin’s acquaintance through Thaulow. He may even have seen the nude studies for *Eustache de Saint-Pierre* (ill. 7). Four years later, Vigeland was still intrigued by the *Burghers*. He wrote to Rodin asking where he could buy photographs of his works. A photograph of the *Burghers*, subsequently acquired, is still to be found in Vigeland’s photography collection.

Vigeland’s comments on medieval art may also link his works to the medieval sculptors and to Rodin’s *Burghers*. An entry from his notebook from 1898 reads: “The more I occupy myself with Gothic art I rejoice in it. I shall probably never be completely captivated by it. But it has feeling, yes, more than any other art. And perhaps in that we may be related.” Like Rodin, Vigeland also seems to have referred to medieval models, or the medievalist *Burghers*, to increase the emotional expression of his figures.

---

*Il. 7*  
The restoration campaigns of the Nidaros Cathedral

Vigeland’s involvement with medieval art becomes evident in his participation in the restoration and rebuilding of the Nidaros Cathedral. Between 1897 and 1902 he created 44 figures for the cathedral’s sculpture program.41 The cathedral, built in an Anglo-French Gothic style from 1152 onwards, was strongly linked to Norway’s emerging national consciousness after 1814. It bore witness to a glorious past when Norway was independent and at the height of its power. In the course of the country’s rising efforts towards independence in the 19th century, ancient monuments became national symbols. Major rebuilding and restoration of the cathedral started in 1869. By the 1890s, the sculptural decoration was on the agenda.42 Not only because of its national character but also because of the poor commission situation for sculptors in Norway at that time, the restoration of the cathedral’s sculpture program was the most complex and lucrative project that modern Norway would assign to its sculptors. For Vigeland, who constantly struggled financially, working for the cathedral was a valuable source of income.43 Vigeland’s engagement in the restoration campaigns can, however, also be explained by both the national significance of the project and his interest in medieval art. He described the Nidaros Cathedral as “our only and truly magnificent historical monument.”44 One of his main works in the cathedral’s sculpture program is a wooden crucifix (ill. 8) attached to the choir arch. The figure of Christ is similar to the anguished depictions of Christ of the late Middle Ages. Vigeland may have received inspiration during his study trips to France and the UK in 1900/1901 where he visited both the Parisian museums and northern French cathedrals.45

Ill. 8
Initially, Vigeland enjoyed working for the Nidaros Cathedral and studying the French cathedrals. See footnote 40. But eventually, he realized that the work kept him from developing his own creations. His ambivalence towards the Gothic style and working for the cathedral can be seen in drawings completed during his travels between 1900 and 1901. His notebooks show a surprisingly small number of Gothic studies, the pages are mostly filled with sketches for future works.

A national artist?

By the late 1890s, Vigeland had begun designing various monument ideas, including one to the great mathematician Niels Henrik Abel, although a competition for such a monument was not to be announced until 1902. He also created busts of important personalities of Norwegian intellectual life. Some of these were not commissioned, but made on his own initiative, such as the bust of Henrik Ibsen (1901–03). Vigeland may have endeavoured to set himself up as a national artist by linking his work to important Norwegians. It is therefore hardly surprising that he argued against Thaulow’s idea of erecting the figure of Jean d’Aire, one of Rodin’s Burghers, on a public square in Kristiania: “Wouldn’t it be sad and outrageous – even though our sculptural art is young – to see the public sphere of our capital […] endowed with foreign sculpture at the expense of ours?”

Still, the major establishment of Vigeland as a national artist was done by the press, art historians and critics, who soon proclaimed him a Nordic genius. The national appropriation is particularly evident in his fountain project, eventually integrated in the artist’s sculpture park. When the fountain was exhibited in the form of a 1/5 sized model in 1905, the press responded with elation. The art historian and critic Andreas Aubert underlined Vigeland’s national significance: “It is important to make clear what Vigeland and his fountain mean for Norwegian culture.” Vigeland himself did not hesitate to take advantage of this to advance the realization of his fountain.

Vigeland seems to have expected a constant renewal of his work in order to correspond with the present time. He acquired books on art from all periods throughout his life and subscribed to a number of international journals. This self-concept as an artist may explain the development in Vigeland’s sculpture around 1909 when he started to work in a more monumental style, and to model his sculptures in opulent rounded forms, recalling the works of his French contemporaries Maillol and Bourdelle. While Rodin was perceived as modern and unconventional at the end of the 19th century, his work was widely considered traditional and classical at the beginning of the 20th century, especially after his death in 1917. Rodin’s modernism was replaced by that of Maillol and Bourdelle. Their monumental and solid forms corresponded better with contemporary architecture than Rodin’s moving and apparently falling figures. Vigeland did probably look to Maillol and Bourdelle to find inspiration for the so-called Vigeland Park, but he included motifs from Norwegian folk art. For the sculpture-groups on the columns of the bridge in Frogner Park, depicting the struggle of man/woman with dragons and lizards (1918–1930) (ill. 9), he again referred to medieval forms he first explored while creating gargoyles for Nidaros cathedral. The dragon/lizard theme appears several times in the Vigeland Park, as in the wrought iron gates (1940s) at the entrance.

Another echo of Norwegian folk art is to be found in the interior of the artist’s apartment, attached to his studio in Frogner Park, where he and his wife lived after 1924. Vigeland designed lamps and candlesticks in wrought iron, pillow patterns, tablecloths and carpets (ill. 10). Both Norwegian artists and art historians considered rural craftsmanship to be
a living heritage of the medieval golden age and an expression of national identity. This view had great resonance at the turn of the century due to Norway’s struggle for independence.55

Rodin’s and Vigeland’s medievalism
Both Vigeland and Rodin harboured a deep admiration for Gothic sculpture, referring to the “depth, more life” and the “feeling” of the Gothic to enhance the emotional intensity in their work. This engagement with medieval art needs to be assessed as an important contribution to the emergence of modern sculpture. By creating his Gothic Burghers Rodin both responded to the government’s call for patriotic monuments framing national identity and participated in the quest for a modern form in sculpture. Rodin revolutionised the public monument by depicting the six burghers as individuals, human rather than heroic, and taking literally the statue off its pedestal. He thus established himself ultimately as both a national and modernist artist and as a descendant of the master builders of the French cathedrals. After having been deeply involved with medieval sculpture in his early years, and particularly in his work for Nidaros cathedral, Vigeland, in his constant efforts towards modernity, later turned to a new style, a new form of modernism. However, by referring to Norwegian vernacular handcraft and the iconography of medieval folk art, for instance in the interior design of his apartment and in the Vigeland Park, he successfully combined modernism and Norwegian medieval tradition. With Vigeland Park, the artist created a monument of national significance for both himself and Norway and made a major contribution to modern sculpture that would ultimately become a place of pilgrimage for the international art audience.
Notes

2 Jeantet, “Exposition des œuvres de Rodin,” 75.
5 Facos and Hirsh, Art, Culture and National Identity, 1–15.
In the article “Guerre aux Démolisseurs” (1825) and his famous novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) Hugo complained about the destruction and decay of medieval buildings. His writings were to play a decisive role in the institutionalization of the national protection movement and ultimately led to the restoration campaigns by Viollet-le-Duc. Brenda Deen Schöldt, *Heritage or Heresy. Preservation and Destruction of Religious Art and Architecture in Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 133–143; Rodin, *Cathédrales*, 8.


Like most of the objects in his private collection, Rodin acquired the *Crucifix* rather late, in April 1908. Archives of the Musée Rodin, Paris, dossier Co.1426 *Christ en croix*; Rodin, *Cathédrales*, 36.


In 1906, Rodin acquired a mourner from the tomb of the Duke of Berry. Archives of the Musée Rodin, Paris, dossier Co.914 *plaurant du tombeau du Duc de Berry*.


Auguste Rodin to Omer Dewavrin, December 8, 1893, as cited in Judrin, Laurent and Viéville, *Bourgeois de Calais*, 76.


Linda Hinners, “‘Perhaps the world’s most renowned sculptor’. On the early reception, collecting and exhibition of Rodin in Sweden,” *Rodin and the Nordic countries*, Hinners, ed. 97–102; Asa Cavalli-


32 Tone Wikborg, Gustav Vigeland. En biografi (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001), 71.

33 Wennberg, French and Scandinavian sculpture, 182; Wikborg, Vigeland, 60.


37 Kokkin, “Rodin et la Norvège,” 121.

38 Gustav Vigeland to Auguste Rodin, September 10, 1897, Archives of the Musée Rodin, Paris.

39 Private photo collection of Gustav Vigeland, Vigelandmuseet, Oslo.


42 Margrete Syrstad Andås et al., eds., The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim. Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 11–16.

43 Wikborg, Vigeland, 69, 76, 123.

44 Vigeland to Sophus Larpent, September 27, 1901, as cited in Wikborg, Vigeland, 264.

45 Wikborg, Vigeland, 141–164.

46 Vigeland to Larpent, Paris, January 2, 1901, and Trondheim, January 2, 1902, as cited in Wikborg, Vigeland, 149, 171.

47 Stang, Gustav Vigeland, 59–86; Wikborg, Vigeland, 179–182.

48 Gustav Vigeland to Erik Werenskiold, as cited in Kokkin, “Rodin et la Norvège,” 126 (trans. by the author).

49 Andreas Aubert, Verdens Gang, November 12, 1905 as cited in Kokkin, “Rodin et la Norvège,” 126 (trans. by the author).

50 Wikborg, Vigeland, 247, 255–256; Stang, Gustav Vigeland, 130–140.

51 Gustav Vigeland to Nils Torp, December 1913, as cited in Skuggen, “Parallels,” 38.


