

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Rodin rethought for centennial

The birth of San Francisco's Legion of Honor — the “Euro-centric” one, as its director describes it, of the pair of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco — was engendered by a love affair with the sculpture of Auguste Rodin (1840-1917).

Museum founder Alma de Bretteville Spreckels first learned about Rodin from a dinner partner in 1914. By the following year, excited by the cultural moment and enthralled by Rodin works sent to the city's Panama-Pacific International Exposition, she purchased six of the largest and most important sculptures when the exposition closed, and set her mind on building a museum in the image of the fair's French Pavilion.

When it opened in 1924, the entire (then-called) California Palace of the Legion of Honor centered on the work of Rodin — as it does today. A massive version of “The Thinker” (1888, enlarged 1902-03) still greets visitors at the center of the entry courtyard. At the opening, the largest, grandest gallery displayed a selection of works on loan from Spreckels'

Auguste Rodin: The Centenary Installation: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through April 9. \$6-\$15; 17 and younger free. Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

expanding Rodin collection; these days, that main gallery and two more are dedicated to Rodin works, virtually all donated by Spreckels and her family over many years.

The story of San Francisco's Rodins — now grown into one of the finest collections of the artist's work anywhere — is retold in a new book by the museums' curator Martin Chapman, beautifully photographed by FAMSF's Randy Dodson. The book accompanies a reinstallation of 54 works, more than half the collection of 90-plus.

Through the catalog and long-term show, the Legion joins in a worldwide celebration of the 100th anniversary of the death of the artist who changed sculpture forever. Other elements include major



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

“Christ and the Magdalene” is among the dozens of Auguste Rodin sculptures in a reinstallation at the Legion of Honor.

exhibitions internationally, a website where one can learn about the shows and the artist (<http://www.rodin100.org/en>), and the issuance of a 2-euro coin.

Among the biggest boosters of Rodin — on a scale surpassing the passion of Alma Spreckels — were Iris Cantor and her late husband, B. Gerald

Cantor. Their names grace the museum at Stanford University among many other beneficiaries of their lifelong generosity, and they were the donors of some 200 Rodin sculptures to Stanford — along with hundreds of others to American museums. Stanford will organize its own reinstallation of Rodin sculpture later this year.

Many Cantor Rodins are posthumous casts, some quite recent, commissioned by the collectors. The Legion's Rodins are particularly valued by scholars because most were made by the artist himself, or under his supervision during his lifetime, and are assumed to represent his own vision of their finish and final appearance.

So how has the reinstallation of the Rodin works changed at the Legion of Honor? In subtle ways, thus far. The chronology of the works is highlighted, and their arrangement in the galleries is particularly striking. One room, from the entryway, is a high-key radiance of white marble and plaster; the others are rich with multiple tones of polished bronze.

More to the point, the selections lean toward the brooding, the tortured and the sexual aspects of the work. The museum intends to dive deeper with comparative installations throughout the year of works by contemporary artists Urs Fischer (April 22-July 9) and Sarah Lucas (July 15-Oct. 1), and a rare look at the relationship of work by the Austrian symbolist painter Gustav Klimt to that of Rodin (Oct. 14-Jan. 28).

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfcchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1