

Non finito : (Pre-)modern ways of organizing creative work with Michel-Ange and Rodin

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A few tourists in far too much of a hurry. People talking far too loudly. Photographers desperately searching for a good angle. A few aesthetes. There were a great many (too many) people that Thursday at the exhibition "[Michelangelo / Rodin. Living Bodies](#)" presented by the Musée du Louvre.

That didn't stop me from wandering through the Hall Napoléon, where the show runned from April 15 to July 20, 2026.

The idea was to highlight the connection between Michelangelo and Auguste Rodin. And moving through this exhibition, with the current and against it, I found it rather successful. The project of putting the genius of the Italian Renaissance in conversation with the "father" of modern sculpture works well. You could feel their shared obsession with muscular tension and the twisting of bodies as a place where souls express themselves.

Late that afternoon, I rediscovered the emotion I first felt on encountering the [Pietà at the entrance of St. Peter's Basilica](#) in Rome. That flesh surging out of stone. That sensation of marble magically brought to life. That discovery of a very human shiver just beneath the surface of rock. That poetry produced by beings whose lives weren't always poetic. I also recaptured one of those moments I look for whenever I "visit" an art exhibition. That instant when I feel caught, plucked up, watched, pierced through by a work. The [Fugit Amor](#) or the [Hand of God](#) both worked their full effect on me. They left me frozen, turned to stone myself, before the incredible movement of these masses we're told are simply resting there.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition, which brought together more than 200 works, was quite instructive and intriguing. It included marbles, bronzes, drawings, plaster casts, and a few very instructive installations.

The two giants of art, and of sculpture in particular, share a remarkable expressive power, even as each belongs to a very different artistic world.

[Michelangelo \(1475–1564\)](#) is emblematic of the Italian High Renaissance. His artistic work is a quest for divine perfection, for the ideal, for absolute beauty. With [David](#), the [Pietà](#), the [Moses](#), and the [Slaves](#), he pushed the artistic possibilities of his time to their furthest limits. In Michelangelo, the human body (especially the male body) is glorified in all its nobility, with unmatched anatomical mastery. The master sought "simply" to free the figure

from the block of marble. In his deepest conviction, the sculpture already existed there, within the stone. The body is idealized, immaculate, balanced, worked in perfect symmetry.

[Auguste Rodin \(1840–1917\)](#) is, in many respects, Michelangelo's heir. He himself claimed this lineage. His major works, from the [Thinker](#) to the [Burghers of Calais](#), by way of [The Kiss](#) or [The Gates of Hell](#), break with the most academic codes of his time. Rodin wants to embrace movement, to capture the unfinished and the rawest emotion. His artistic work is marked by deliberately rough, sketch-like surfaces. He seeks to express an existential storm, the tragedy of the human condition. His materials are as much bronze as marble. And there is an incredible modernity in his fragmentation of works and his staging of bodies.

As this exhibition made clear, the two sculptors share the same obsession with the truth of the body. They show the same unprecedented ability to breathe an inner life into stone or metal. [We know that Rodin studied Michelangelo during a decisive trip to Italy in 1875](#). He came back transformed, convinced that sculpture had to capture the soul as much as the form. Where Michelangelo raises man toward the divine, the eternal, the sublime, Rodin brings him back to his fragility and his humanity. One sculpts gods; the other sculpts men.

Old habits die hard... As I made my way through this experience, I was also struck by the difference in their philosophies of creation **and how these translate into the way they organized the creative process.**

Michelangelo maintained an almost mystical relationship with marble. For him, sculpture was not fabrication but revelation. As I said earlier, the figure already existed somewhere within the raw block. The sculptor only had to remove the excess material to set it free. The *Slaves* (or *Prisoners*) perfectly illustrate this philosophy: these figures, half-freed from the block, seem to struggle to emerge from the stone, as if Michelangelo had wanted to show the very process of revelation. The unfinished here is not a failure. It is, rather, a kind of ontological quasi-truth.

In practice, Michelangelo chose his own blocks of marble in Carrara himself, sometimes after weeks of obstinate searching. He worked alone, directly into the mass, without an intermediate full-scale model. He worked frontally, sculpting the way one unrolls a painting, from front to back. The master generally refused any

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delegation; he saw any assistance as a betrayal of the creative act (except for finishing touches, which had an even greater presence in the painted side of his work). His commitment was total. Michelangelo lived in a relationship of physical exhaustion with his material. He gave himself over entirely to creative work, sleeping little, eating little, forgetting himself completely.

Carried along by a spirit of modernity, Rodin carried out a revolution that was as organizational as it was artistic in his creative work. Trained in the tradition of 19th-century workshops, he adopted, and pushed to the extreme, the model of the division of creative labor. His process rested on a clearly defined chain.

Everything begins with conception, the artist's exclusive domain. Rodin modeled his forms in clay or plaster, often on a small scale. The fundamental creative gesture happens here. The twist of a torso, the position of a hand, the expression of a face are "conceived" at this stage. This visionary designer works fast, intuitively, sometimes assembling fragments of different bodies already conceived in earlier creations. This is often far from the exhaustion Michelangelo lived through and sought out. Rodin assembles and reassembles as much as he creates. All of this is very modern and strongly recalls the contemporary process of building on past creations.

Next comes the finishing work with the praticiens, specialized assistants. These delegates take over from the designer. Armed with the pointing machine (an instrument for transferring measurements), they faithfully reproduce the model in marble at the desired scale, mechanically transferring thousands of measurement points from the original. This work is highly technical, almost scientific.

Finally comes the final touch. Rodin returns to the scene of the crime. He steps back in at the end of the process to animate the surface. He refines the details, sharpens a gesture, deepens a gaze, heightens a tension. These finishing touches often give the work that characteristic vibration. Rodin knew exactly where his final intervention would make the difference.

Of course, this difference in the organization of creation leads to a radically different conception of the artwork itself.

Michelangelo produces absolute singularities. With him, every sculpture is irreducible, tied to a particular block, to a particular moment in life. The idea of a reproduction is almost inconceivable within his logic.

Rodin, by contrast, questions the very notion of the original and even challenges the usual terms of

attribution and ownership of a work. We move closer to the logics of duplication in our contemporary world. The same figure can exist in plaster, in marble, in bronze, in several sizes, assembled differently depending on the version. *The Thinker* exists in dozens of copies around the world. *The Gates of Hell* is a permanent work in progress that he reorganized for thirty years without ever finishing it. This logic is profoundly modern. It anticipates the questions the art of the 20th century would raise about reproducibility and the aura of the work — questions that digital technology and AI amplify even further today.

Ultimately, Michelangelo embodies the humanist ideal of the Renaissance. He is the universal artist, the solitary genius in direct communion with God and matter. Rodin, by contrast, is a child of the Industrial Revolution. He rationalizes creation and thinks in terms of process. His work unknowingly anticipates how the great workshops of contemporary art would come to function, from Brancusi to Koons, who would push this model to its most extreme logic, almost never touching their own works themselves.

Within these differences in their creative philosophies, I would like to dwell on one particular point that the exhibition proposed by the Louvre strongly foregrounds: **the use of the *Non finito*** (Baum, Bayer and Wagstaff, 2016; Mangone, 2021).

In Michelangelo, the unfinished acts as a metaphysical truth. It is not a deliberate aesthetic choice, but rather something far more troubling and ambiguous. His unfinished figures, like the *Prisoners* at the Accademia in Florence, seem to be prisoners of matter itself, halfway between being and non-being. We can never really know whether Michelangelo *wanted* to stop there or whether something interrupted his hand. We don't know whether an abandoned commission, a flawed block, a deep dissatisfaction forced him to stop where he did. This ambiguity makes the unfinished quality of his works all the more moving. The question remains eternally open and unresolved: is the figure struggling to escape the marble, or is the marble holding it back against its will? Both readings coexist, and Michelangelo ultimately never settles the matter.

This *non finito* is also linked to his conception of an ideal of perfection that is forever out of reach. Michelangelo was haunted by a permanent sense of failure in the face of what he was trying to express. For this absolute perfectionist, no work could ever truly be finished, because none could reach the divine perfection he was aiming for. The unfinished thus becomes the trace of a fundamental humility, the honesty of an infinite ambition confronted with the limits of the human condition. Yes,

whatever he did, Michelangelo remained a human being among other human beings. There is also, most likely, a theological dimension to this incompleteness. Raw matter is the earthly world; the form set free is the soul that longs for God. The unfinished sculpture literally represents the human soul still caught within the flesh, not yet freed.

With Rodin, the unfinished and incompleteness become something else² (Le Normand-Romain, 2014 and Giudicessi, 2020). They are a deliberate visual language. For the sculptor, the relationship to the unfinished is a fully conscious, fully mastered aesthetic tool. When a figure emerges half-formed from a block of raw marble (as in *The Hand of God*), that is not a sign of interrupted work. It is exactly what Rodin asked his praticiens to produce. **He decided where to stop, and that stopping point is a carefully considered artistic decision, tested beforehand with his prototypes.** For Rodin, the contrast between the polished surface of the flesh and the raw roughness of the block heightens the impression of life. The figure seems all the more alive, all the more vibrant, for being surrounded by inert matter. The unfinished creates a dramatic effect the finished could never produce. Just as the Impressionists left the brushstroke visible to suggest light rather than describe it, Rodin left the raw material visible to suggest the emergence of life rather than represent it statically.

At bottom, what separates the two men on this question comes down to a simple but very profound opposition. In Michelangelo, the unfinished escapes him. It is the mark of a struggle, a doubt, an impossibility. The artist wanted to go further, but something prevented him, whether external circumstances or the inner dissatisfaction of a perfectionist haunted by the absolute. In Rodin, the unfinished is fully owned. It is the result of a choice, an aesthetic calculation, a visual rhetoric. Rodin knows exactly the effect he produces, and produces it deliberately.

All of this speaks to our present moment. **Today, the unfinished quality of creation offered up by our capitalism follows a very different logic of organization.** Where Michelangelo touched the unfinished through an excess of ambition, and Rodin through a conscious aesthetic choice, capitalism produces incompleteness in a structural and deliberate way. It doesn't seek to reveal a fundamental truth; rather, through a frenzied and increasingly self-generated string of entertaining revelations, it mainly works to sustain a sense of lack.

The mechanism of our digital capitalism is at once simple and formidable. A product must never be delivered

complete, in retrospect. The iPhone had no USB-C port for ten years, then it did. The car doesn't have a certain feature, but it will in the next model. The video game ships with half its content, the rest to come as paid DLC. The software is in perpetual "beta version." The countless, barely credible bugs of a piece of software become the space in which a future version can develop. More mundanely, scrolling through social media and increasingly confessional conversations with AI work in the same way. The unfinished is no longer a trace of the creative process. It is the product itself, designed to be replaced.

The case of digital platforms is especially striking. Netflix, Spotify, social media, online games are open works in the literal sense, but of a perverse openness. They are never finished because they are designed to capture attention and sustain the relationship indefinitely. Infinite scroll is the *non finito* of digital capitalism. It slides across a surface with no edge, no end, no possible resolution. And the "intimacy dividends" of AI act in an even more perverse way, serving the self-generation of ever more personal and intimate data than ever before.

Michelangelo left a figure half-freed from the marble, and that incompleteness created an upward tension, toward the ideal, toward God, toward an impossible perfection. Infinite scroll creates a tension with no direction and no elevation: a horizontal agitation without end, which leads nowhere but back to itself. There is even a fascinating internal contradiction within contemporary capitalism on this question. On one hand, it produces the unfinished to stir up desire for the next version. On the other, it programs the death of objects, their degradation, their incompatibility, their obsolescence, in order to force renewal.

This, too, is the exact inverse of Rodin. The French sculptor chose *where to stop* so that the work would be more alive. Capitalism chooses when to kill off the product so the cycle can start again. One makes a birth out of the unfinished; the other makes a programmed death.

After walking back through the exhibition in reverse for one last look, I finally left the Hall Napoléon.

In the end, I was moved by this rather successful conversation. Of course, I also had a few surprises. There's no escaping, here, a certain vision of the solitary, heroic, prophetic genius. A bit more fragility around the uncommon fates of these two men might have served the argument even better. I was also struck by the rather

² See also de Vaujany, Pulk and Lenglet (2026) on this issue of incompleteness.

limited presence of the female body in these two bodies of work — at times a space onto which the masculine projects itself, at times mere anatomy. The visit could have used a slightly more critical commentary, some counterpoints from other female bodies, or a female perspective on these male and female bodies. A third figure might have enriched the conversation, Camille Claudel, Barbara Hepworth, or Niki de Saint Phalle among others. But that might have broken the powerful thread of lineage running through the show. I also occasionally missed a stronger sense of perspective on art history, a contrast drawn between two historical periods and their aesthetics. But for an exhibition this instructive and accessible, one can't do everything.

On my way out, I took the opportunity for one more detour through the Louvre's permanent collections... a small habit made possible by the free access granted by the auditeur card. I settled once again in front of a few works whose presence I love: [*The Raft of the Medusa*](#), [*Liberty Leading the People*](#), then the [*Venus de Milo*](#). A few quieter ancient or medieval pieces as well.

And once again I savor that experience of an artistic work that exceeds every possibility of an article: its mystery.

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