



“Le Penseur”

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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON once lamented the shallowness of much latter-day art. Speaking of sculpture, he wrote that the world was weary of statues that said nothing, and hailed Rodin as the great thinker among modern artists. Curiously enough, the Rodin statue in the Place du Pantheon, with which Parisians were familiar before the war, is most typical of the great sculptor's attitude not only toward art but toward life. The Thinker, a huge, muscular figure of a man with bent shoulders, elbow on knee and chin on hand, dominates the neighborhood of the Pantheon and also the front of his museum at suburban Meudon. Judging from its many replicas, it was a favorite theme with the master.

It was first exhibited in Paris in 1889, though the same figure, much smaller and in relief, appeared years earlier on the bronze doors designed for a proposed Palace of Decorative Arts. These doors, called "Porte de l'Enfer," were suggested by a visit to Italy and much study of Dante; and on the upper crossbeam appeared The Thinker looking down upon the scenes depicted around him. In 1904 a gigantic bronze of The Thinker was shown at the Salon, while in the same year he found his way to St. Louis and, in the form of a large plaster cast and a small bronze, was exhibited in London. He was clearly intended to typify man's contemplation of the problem of human life. Above all The Thinker embodies the leit motif which runs through Rodin's work: the transmission of thought through art. The famous La Pensee, in the Luxembourg, a woman's head bent in the same grave attitude, is still another representation of the same theme.

From his pedestal in the Place du Pantheon The Thinker has seen strange sights during the last three years. He has watched the gay, insouciant faces of the passers-by take on a grim determination strangely incongruous with the flippant Quartier Latin, and has seen mouths set in unalterable decision. Regiments have marched by to the stirring, inflaming music of the "Marseillaise." Untrained boys carrying bundles and tricolors, and tricked out with the ribbons of the cockade, have passed him in disorderly ranks for the training grounds of France's fighting manhood. Months later, they have come again, in serried ranks, accoutered and drilled into warring men, and The Thinker, one imagines, has noted the change writ large upon them: the will to conquer and to sacrifice, the fine-tempered courage, and the joy of dedication.

His own gravity seems to be more in accord with the present life of Paris than with the free and careless past. His huge limbs serve to accentuate the mental grandeur and strength of France in these days of struggle and fiery trial. Where once he seemed to express "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," he now seems less occupied with the littleness than with the greatness of the life that surges at his feet. One fancies that his thoughts are climbing the heights, like the trees in Rodin's rolling vista at Meudon, out of the hollow of national life.

Paris has always been dominated by its statues. But there is usually this difference between the statues of Paris and statues of other cities: they think and speak, or they do something that other statues never seem quite able to manage. Robert Louis Stevenson, asking for statues that should speak things worth uttering, might have pointed to a hundred examples in other cities that not only do not say the thing "worth uttering," but do not speak at all. There is the noted example of President Kruger in top hat and frock coat; the statues of the Georges, hard by Trafalgar Square, that never could, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered more than effigies; there is the huge "Bavaria," at Munich, and there are Jubilee Queen Victorias without end, that never can or could be considered as thinking, speaking, or doing anything else but sitting. But The Thinker is not posing, not dressed up in formal "Sunday best," not assuming a stained-glass attitude, but striking the imagination with a mood translating and interpreting man. And, paradoxically enough, the Parisians are the only people who can quite take this kind of statue for granted. That is not to say it is even now altogether symbolic of Paris, because Paris habitually feels rather than thinks, knows by intuition, not by reflection. The chic, emotional, chattering French woman once glanced and passed on her way. Tourists once noted the statue in their guide-books, failed to grasp its significance, and went on to gaze at the sublimities of the Pantheon.

But Paris has developed a new understanding of its great statue, and of the master who always aimed at presenting an idea rather than mere photographic accuracy. Once the war is over, incalculable industrial economical changes for the better will bring in their train a great revival in the realm of art, and the events of the last four years will be found to have immeasurably deepened France's artistic ideals and expression.

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Set by Raymond Harrington, Donald Roach,

Richard Parsons and Joseph Sologub.

WASHINGTON
JUNIOR
HIGH SCHOOL
PRESS



Rodin's Masterpiece

“Le Penseur”

(THE THINKER)

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

Photo by O. G. WOOD