

Auguste Rodin

AN ARTIST'S TESTAMENT

Translated by James Bogan and Kay Henry

It you desire to celebrate beauty, then you are one of my children. Here you will find the results of that long experiment, my life, which I bequeath to you.

To begin with, love devotedly the masters who preceded you. Bow down before Phidias and Michelangelo. Admire the divine serenity of the one, the savage anguish of the other. Admiration is wine to noble souls. Refrain, however, from imitating your predecessors. Respect tradition, but discriminate that part of it which is eternally fertile: love of Nature and sincerity. These are the two strongest passions of genius. All men of genius have adored Nature; never have they misled us. In this way, tradition holds the key to innovation, since it is tradition itself which demands that you incessantly examine reality and which forbids you to submit blindly to any master.

Let Nature be your only goddess. Have absolute faith in her. You may be certain that she is never ugly: Trust her.

All is beautiful to the artist, because in every being and every thing, his penetrating gaze discovers the essence, the interior truth which shines through physical form. This truth is Beauty herself. Study religiously. You will not fail to find Beauty, because you will find Truth.

Work relentlessly!

Sculptors: You must strengthen within yourselves the sense of depth. It is difficult for the mind to adjust to this notion, since it can conceive only of surface. It is not equipped to imagine forms in their depth; nevertheless, this is your task. Above all, you must establish clearly the preliminary drawings for the figures which you sculpt, paying special attention to the perspective given to each part of the body: the head, the shoulders, the torso, the legs. Art demands decision. Only by the well-defined flow of line can you plunge into space and capture the notion of depth. When your drawings are finished, *voilà!* your statue is already alive. The details are born, and they take care of themselves from then on.

As soon as you begin to sculpt, think no longer of surface, but only of depth. Let your mind conceive of every surface as the extremity of a massive force which pulses from within. Imagine the forms as if they were aimed at you. All of life surges out from a center, germinating and opening outward like a flower. So too, one always senses a powerful impelling force inside beautiful sculpture. This is the secret of the art of antiquity.

Painters! You too must look at reality with a sense of depth. Consider, for example, a portrait by Raphael. When this master paints a front view of someone, he does it so that the chest is angled slightly away from you, thereby giving an illusion of the third dimension. All great painters plumb space. Their power proceeds from their sense of depth. Don't forget: There are no surface features, there are only volumes. When you draw, don't be preoccupied with contour, but focus on depth. Depth rules contour.

Practice incessantly! Work through the breaking point!

Art is nothing but feeling. But within the science of volumes, proportions, and colors, the most vivid feeling is paralyzed without a skillful hand. What would become of even the greatest poet in a foreign country whose language he could not speak? Unfortunately, in this new generation of artists, there are a number of poets who refuse to learn to speak; they only mumble and stammer.

Have patience: Don't count on Inspiration. It does not exist. The sole qualities of the artist are wisdom, attention, sincerity, and will-*ingness*. Perform your task like honest laborers.

Be true, my children, but remember this does not mean "Be tediously exact." There exists a superficial accuracy, that of photography and mass production, but art begins with *interior* truth. All of your forms, all of your colors, must translate feeling. The artist who contents himself with paltry realism and who slavishly reproduces worthless details will never be a master. If you have ever visited a cemetery in Italy, you have doubtless noticed with what childish passivity the artists whose job it is to decorate the tombs set themselves to copying embroidery, lace, and even braids of hair in their statues. Maybe they are exact, but they are not true, because they pay no attention to the

soul. Nearly all of today's sculptors belong to the Italian Cemetery School. In the monuments on our public squares, all you can see are frock-coats, tables, pedestals, chairs, machines, balloons, and telegraphs. This is not art! There is no interior truth. Look upon this rubbish with horror!

Be profoundly honest, like the lion, my children. Never hesitate to express what you feel even when you find yourself opposing long-accepted ideas. Perhaps you will not be understood at first, but your isolation will be short-lived. Friends will soon come to you, because what is profoundly true for one man is true for all men. Don't resort to gimmicks and contortions to attract public attention. Be simple! Be natural! The most beautiful subjects are those right in front of you, those which you know best. My dear friend, the great Eugene Carriere, who left us so suddenly, had a gift for portraying his wife and children. For him to celebrate maternal love was sublimity. The masters are those who use their own eyes to look at what everyone else has seen, and perceive the beauty which habit has veiled. Phony artists always wear other people's glasses.

The main thing is to be moved, to love, to hope, to tremble, to live! Be a man before being an artist! "True eloquence mocks the pretense of eloquence," said Pascal. So too, true art mocks the pretense of art. Again, take the example of Eugene Carriere. In art shows most paintings are just paintings. His, there among all the others, are windows open to life!

Welcome criticism which is just. You can recognize it easily as something which confirms a doubt which has besieged you. But don't let yourself be broken by criticism which your conscience knows to be false, and don't be afraid of unjust criticism. It will only disgust your friends: they will combat it, and it will force them to think about their friendship for you, which they will hold onto more resolutely once they have examined their own motives.

If your talent is newly awakened, you can count on having only a few supporters and lots of enemies. Don't be discouraged. Your supporters will triumph, because they know why they love you. Your enemies do not know why they hate you. Your supporters are impassioned by Truth and will always be recruiting new followers for her;

the zeal of your enemies for their false beliefs will not withstand the test of time. Your supporters are stalwart and constant; your enemies change with the wind. The victory of Truth is certain!

Don't waste time forming political or worldly ties. You will see many of your peers attain honor and fortune through their schemes, but they are not true artists. Some of them are nevertheless very clever, and if you undertake to fight them on their own territory, you will waste as much time as they do; in other words, your whole life. You won't have any time at all left for being an artist. Love your calling passionately. There is none more beautiful, and it is much nobler than the layman would believe. The artist should serve as a great example for society. He adores his work; his most precious reward is the joy of doing well. Nowadays, unfortunately, workers are often persuaded to hate their jobs, and they do them poorly. The world will not be happy until every man has the soul of an artist, until every man takes pleasure in his work.

Art is a magnificent lesson in sincerity. The true artist always expresses what he feels at the risk of upsetting all the established precedents. He thus teaches openness to his fellow-man. Imagine what marvellous progress would suddenly be realized if absolute Truth reigned among us! Ah, how quickly would society rid herself of error and ugliness once she had been led to confess them, and how rapidly would our earth become a Paradise!

