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Sakountala

Camille Claudel at Work

Press Release

Exposition
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Celebrating the 160th anniversary of Camille Claudel's birth, the Camille Claudel honours the sculptor through one of her major works: *Sakountala*. From 14th September 2024 to 12th January 2025, the exhibition "Camille Claudel at Work: *Sakountala*" delves into the creation of this masterpiece with a tumultuous history. Inspired by Hindu mythology, the artist's very first monumental sculpture experienced both success and controversy before falling into oblivion.

Gathering nearly 100 objects, the exhibition revisits the creative process of *Sakountala*, its reception history, its literary inspiration, and the many variations Camille Claudel proposed at the end of her career.

With exceptional loans from the Rodin Museum, the National Library of France, and the Orsay Museum has been labeled "Exhibition of National Interest" by the French Ministry of Culture.

***Sakountala* : Creation, Success, and Controversy**

Camille Claudel was only 21 when she exhibited *Sakountala*, a couple of lovers inspired by Indian literature, in 1888. This work brought her public and critical recognition. It was the only one to earn her an award at the Salon during her career.

However, she did not receive the French State commission that would have allowed her to carve a monumental marble. Camille Claudel then gave the plaster of *Sakountala* to the Châteauroux Museum in 1895.

When it was installed, the left foot of Douchanta was broken. The work was then criticized for its erotic character, size, massiveness, fragility, and patina by the local bourgeoisie, who struggled to appreciate her work. The plaster then gradually deteriorated in the museum's storages.

It was only in the 1980s, following the rediscovery of the artist, that the artwork emerged again.



From Hindu Myth to Timeless Sculpture

"*The Recognition of Sakountala*," a drama written by Hindu poet Kālidāsa, probably in the 4th or 5th century, tells the story of King Douchanta, who meets Sakountala during a hunt. After marrying Sakountala, Douchanta falls victim to a curse and forgets her.

While this myth has rarely been depicted in painting or sculpture, it has been translated into French several times, made into a ballet, and performed in plays. In the exhibition, set models, costume designs, and photographs provide a glimpse of the elaborate decor used to impress and transport audiences during these performances. Visitors are invited to compare the highly Orientalist and lavish stagings with Camille Claudel's treatment of the theme, which is stripped down, sober, and timeless.



The Variations of *Sakountala*

Camille Claudel only managed to translate *Sakountala* into noble material at the end of her career. In 1905, she sculpted a reduced version in marble for the Countess of Maigret, under the title *Vertumnus and Pomona*. Loaned by the Rodin Museum for this exhibition, this piece showcases the sculptor's virtuosity and the degree of perfection she had achieved. The bronze, edited by her loyal supporter and friend Eugène Blot, was presented the same year at the Salon d'Automne, entitled *The Abandonment*. Stripped of its mythological reference, this name imbues the work with a more allegorical dimension, while meeting the needs of its commercialisation. In 1906, the State ordered Claudel a statue of a woman derived from *Sakountala*. Now alone and wounded, she is depicted as the daughter of Niobe succumbing to an arrow shot by Apollo or Artemis.



"The most extraordinary new work at the Salon is this *Sakountala*, a chastely passionate group by a young girl, Miss Camille Claudel."

Paul Leroi



Press Visit

A tour of the exhibition, led by Cécile Bertran, director of the Camille Claudel Museum and curator of the exhibition, is scheduled for the day before its opening, on Friday, 13 September at 10:30 am.

Crédits

Cover: Camille Claudel, *Vertumnus and Pomona*, 1905, marble, inv. S.01293
© Paris, Rodin Museum, photo Chistian Baraja

p.1: William Elborne, Camille Claudel modelling *Sakountala*, circa 1887, photograph, inv. Ph.528 © Paris, Rodin Museum

p.2: Camille Claudel, *Wounded Niobid*, 1907, bronze, inv. FNAC 2161 © National Centre for Plastic Arts, on deposit at Poitiers Sainte-Croix Museum

Alfred Albert, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1858, inv. D216-21 © National Library of France / Opera Museum Library

p.3: Camille Claudel, *Sakountala*, 1888, plaster © Bertrand Museum Collections of the City of Châteauroux

Camille Claudel Museum © Frédéric Lopez

Camille Claudel, *The Abandonment* (small model), 1905, bronze, edition by Eugène Blot © Camille Claudel Museum, photo Marco Illuminati

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