

Art: Rodin's Homages To Balzac at Modern

By HILTON KRAMER

RODIN AND BALZAC: These two great names, which still resound with the Promethean energies that made Paris the literary and artistic capital of the world in the 19th century, are the subject of a small, elegant and instructive exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. "Rodin & Balzac" is a small show based on a big story—a story that takes us back to an era when even the greatest names in the arts were still subject to violent controversies of taste.

In 1891, Auguste Rodin was universally admired as the greatest sculptor of his day. He was 51 years old, immensely productive and already regarded as an immortal genius and a national treasure. The French Government provided him with lavish studio space, and for people of wealth and influence the world over he was the obvious choice when it came to commissioning an official portrait or erecting an important monument.

It came as no surprise, then, when a respected French literary organization—the Société des Gens de Lettres—decided in 1891 to award its commission for a Balzac monument to Rodin, although the choice was by no means unanimous—the vote was 12 to 8. In his official letter to Rodin, Emile Zola was only stating the common view when he wrote, "We all reckon on your great talent to give us a superb statue."

The task of producing this monument occupied Rodin for six years. He immersed his self in Balzac's tremen-

dous literary oeuvre, studied the existing portraits and photographs of the writer, who died in 1850, and created a great many studies—heads of Balzac in youth and old age, full figures both clothed and nude, in a multitude of variations. The Balzac monument was clearly a project close to the sculptor's heart.

Yet, when he produced the final version in 1897, it met with instant rejection and became a scandal. The Société des Gens de Lettres canceled its commission, and the city of Paris, which had intended to install the monument in the courtyard of the Palais Royal, withdrew its support. "How I was slandered, insulted!" Rodin remarked in later years.

It was not until 1939 that the Balzac monument was finally erected in Paris, where it has been a familiar Montparnasse landmark ever since. Since 1955, when another cast of the nine-foot-tall bronze work was installed in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, it has also been a familiar sight in New York. It stands today serene in its immense dignity and authority, looking—especially in the Modern's sculpture garden, where it is surrounded by works of more recent date—more like the work of an old master than the art of a controversial modernist.

In the current exhibition, directed by Alicia Legg, associate curator of painting and sculpture at the museum and based on an earlier show organized by Prof. Albert Elsen at Stanford University, we are given 11 bronze studies for the monument and some

related photographs—Gertrude Kasbier's 1907 portrait of Rodin and Edward Steichen's 1911 outdoor photographs of the monument itself.

Even in this small selection, we can follow something of the drama that went into Rodin's imaginative search for the ideal Balzac image. There is an 1891 bust of Balzac as a young man, an 1891-92 mask of Balzac smiling, a "Naked Balzac With Folded Arms" from 1892-93, an 1896-97 headless naked figure study and a final study for the monument itself from 1897-98.

Rodin's conception undergoes a metamorphosis akin to the life cycle of its subject. Young manhood is represented by an appealing realism; old age by an almost unruly expressionism charged with passion and energy. It is all tremendously moving and tremendously enlightening—enlightening about life as well as art—and part of the beauty of it is that we can see the great final denouement standing in the garden, the serene result of this huge labor.

The exhibition, occasioned by 10 recent gifts to the museum from the B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, remains on view through Nov. 16. The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, is open daily, except Wednesdays, from 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 9. Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1.25 for students, 75 cents for under-16's and the elderly; Wednesdays, it's pay as you wish.

Other exhibitions this week include the following:

Wilbur Niewald (Ingber, 3 East 78th



Auguste Rodin's bronze studies for a Balzac monument, on view at the Museum of Modern Art "Rodin's imaginative search for the ideal Balzac image"

Street): Although his work is known and admired by painters in New York, and he has even taught here, Wilbur Niewald, who lives in Kansas City, Mo., will be a new name to most gallerygoers. He works in a classical representational style, obviously based on Cézanne, and his paintings bring to this style the kind of authority and intelligence that come of long experience in the medium.

The outstanding pictures are the still lifes—solid, elegant structures of form and color and light, everywhere touched with subtle painterly nuances. "Still Life With Blue Cloth" is, perhaps, the most beautiful, with its lovely subtleties of blue, lavender and gray light, but all of the still lifes sing, and the "Landscape With Red Apartment Building" is almost as good. There is

also an impressive self-portrait. Closes Saturday.

Robert Hudson (Frumkin, 50 West 57th Street): There is a wacky, high-spirited and very inventive imagination at work in the drawings, paintings and constructions of Robert Hudson, a California artist, who is better-known as a sculptor. At times he reminds one of Miró—the Miró of the "poetic objects"—and at times of Jasper Johns, but the basic spirit of the work locates it firmly within the boundaries of California Dada.

The ideas in the constructions—adorned with old enameled saucepans, driftwood, a string of beads, etc., have, alas, a slightly shopworn look, but the collage-drawings look fresh and beautiful. There is a lively wit in them,

a vivid gift for color and also a great delight in the sheer beauty of the materials. (Through Oct. 22.)

Tom Forrestall (Marlborough, 40 West 57th Street): With an Andrew Wyeth exhibition soon to open at the Metropolitan Museum and 19th-century American realism installed at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, it is timely, perhaps, to have this show of a well-known Canadian realist. Although Tom Forrestall is said to practice a style uniquely Canadian, his work looks to eyes in the United States, very much akin to Mr. Wyeth's—except that Mr. Forrestall encloses his realist images in pictures of circular and other unexpected shapes. It all looks oppressively banal to this observer, but in Canada it is said to enjoy a large popular following. (Through Oct. 16.)