



Aristide Maillol (1861-1944)

The Quest for Harmony

The Mountain, 1937,
stone, 176 × 185 × 78 cm,
Lyon, musée des Beaux-Arts

12 April – 21 August 2022
Musée d'Orsay

What key insights does this exhibition bring to our understanding of Maillol's work?

[Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat / Antoinette Le Normand-Romain](#) – The exhibition has been enriched by research carried out in close collaboration with the Fondation Dina Vierny - Musée Maillol. Thirty-six recently discovered and still largely unedited sketchbooks cast a new light on the genesis of certain works.

Maillol is a well-known but, paradoxically, misunderstood artist. A superficial survey of his work might suggest that he always adopted the same female canon in a series of repetitive formulas, but this could not be further from the truth. We were keen to show how he brings depth to a narrow corpus of forms via multiple versions and

a variety of materials.

Mediterranean, for which the model appeared in 1905, was a manifesto for a revival of sculpture that challenged Rodin's expressionism, and forms the central premise of the exhibition. In a special partnership, the Oskar Reinhart Foundation in Winterthur (Switzerland) has agreed to the loan of the stone sculpture commissioned in 1904 by Maillol's major patron Count Harry Kessler. It can be seen for the first time alongside the marble version at the Musée d'Orsay commissioned by the French State in 1923. Viewed together, they reveal a significant development which can be attributed both to the difference in material and to the eighteen years separating them.

Biographical highlights

8 December 1861

Maillol is born in Banyuls-sur-Mer (Pyrénées-Orientales).

1882

Maillol unsuccessfully applies to the École des Beaux-arts à Paris. (He is admitted in 1885).

1888

First work presented at the Salon: *Landscape*.

1895

The embroidery *Pastoral Concert* is exhibited at the Salon of the Société nationale des beaux-arts and purchased by Princess Bibesco.

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Did Maillol always have a vocation for sculpture?

[Antoinette Le Normand-Romain](#) – Maillol's initial plan was to become a painter. Soon after graduating from the École des Beaux-arts in Paris his influences shifted from Courbet (*Self-portrait*, 1884) to Cézanne, as can be seen in his landscapes. His encounter with Gauguin (circa 1889) proved critical: he prioritised formal simplicity and came to the realisation that he had to carve out his own path. His most accomplished paintings are characterised by a striking flatness and decorative aspect. They demonstrate his taste for so-called "Primitive" art, the Quattrocento (First Italian Renaissance), and Gothic art.

In 1890, Maillol turned to embroidery, creating designs which were then produced by needlewomen, and continued to do so until 1904, although he pursued other art forms: directly carving wood, making ceramics, and modelling statuettes. He was extremely curious about materials, and in this respect he was typical of the late 19th century, experimenting for example with natural dyes for his embroidery wools. His works are characterised by the pursuit of archaism, but also a simplicity and artistic probity which are his trademark.

In Banyuls (Pyrénées-Orientales), in 1895-1896, Maillol began to model statuettes from local white clay. The joy he experienced from kneading the clay and the daily presence of one of his embroiderers, Clotilde Narcis, who soon became his wife, led him to take up sculpture as his main form of expression.

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Concert of Women, also known as *Pastoral Concert* or *Music*, 1895, hand embroidery with wool, silk, flax, and silver thread, 160 × 208 cm, Copenhagen, Design Museum

2

Woman with a Parasol, circa 1892, oil on canvas, 190,5 × 149,6 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay

1896
Maillol marries Clotilde Narcis, who is also his model.

1902
First solo exhibition at the Vollard gallery in Paris.

1905
Woman [Mediterranean] (1905), commissioned by Count Kessler, is exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. Commission for the *Monument to Blanqui*.

1907
Desire, commissioned by Kessler, is exhibited at the Salon. Maillol creates the first designs for the *Monument to Cézanne*. He produces *Action in Chains* for the *Monument to Blanqui*.

1909
Receives a commission for four figures, *The Seasons*, for Ivan Morozov's music room in Moscow. The group is installed in 1912.

Why are there so many female nudes in his work?

Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat – The female nude appeared in Maillol's art in about 1895, when he was already thirty-four years old; Parisian models were too expensive and young women in Banyuls were anxious about their reputation. Everything changed when Clotilde arrived. He allegedly said: "I lifted my wife's skirts and found a block of marble". She posed for his first major sculpture masterpieces, *Mediterranean*, *Night*, and *Action in Chains*, which were already characterised by a synthesis of volumes: "What I want," said Maillol, "is for the young girl from whom I am modelling a statue to represent all young girls."

In 1904, his patron Count Kessler, a German collector and great admirer of French artists, asked why there were no male figures in his art. The reason was financial: "Well, it's because I don't have a model. Rodin can afford as many models as he likes, but the rest of us artists usually have to use our wives". His patron provided him with a young model, Gaston Colin, who posed for the relief *Desire*, and also the statuette *The Cyclist*. Doubtless to please Kessler, Maillol claimed: "it's a lot easier. With a man there is always something, a muscle, to fix on. With women, there is nothing, no shapes, you have to invent it all." Yet he devoted himself to the female nude. He liked his women full-bodied and dense, in keeping with what he believed to be the "generous and structured Mediterranean type".

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Desire, 1907,
lead cast by Eugène Rudier,
120 × 114,4 × 25 cm,
Paris, musée d'Orsay

1910

The Cyclist is commissioned by Kessler and exhibited at the Salon.

1911

Sets up a paper mill (Montval) to print books for the Cranach Presse in Weimar (Germany), a publishing house founded by Kessler.

1914

Maillol is accused of spying. Clemenceau helps him to clear his name. His son Lucien joins the army.

1916

A group of ladies donates the stone of *The Night* to the Kunst Museum Winterthur (Switzerland).

1921-1923

Installation of his *War Memorials to the dead* in Elné, Céret, and Port-Vendres. The French State purchases *The Cyclist* and commissions a marble replica of *Mediterranean*.

What was Maillol's working method?

[Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat](#) – Maillol drew extensively – candid sketches of a model spotted in the street or during proper sittings, and from memory. “Nearly all of my drawings are from memory. You always have to work from memory”. Numerous sketchbooks, often very small in size, reveal everything that caught his attention, figures both nude and clothed, repeated and in different versions, and positioned in mirror image, but also bicycles, animals and foliage, alongside notes of the names of artists, collectors, suppliers, and models.

He modelled “as if he were stroking the forms with his fingers” in wet clay, years later sometimes, both with and without a model, which helped to give him the necessary degree of objectivity. Three works were not subjected to this retrospective scrutiny, *Youth*, *The Cyclist*, and *Harmony*, which was never completed. He reverted to using models from necessity rather than choice: “Now I have no memory left, I can't do a thing without a model,” he said in 1941. He preferred to add material rather than to remove it, as it gave him greater freedom.

The original terracotta was then cast in plaster, but was still a work in progress for the sculptor; he continued to refine the volumes, and even to change the position of the limbs on the plaster which he reworked wet. He then produced the final work in stone or metal.

Stone, bronze, lead – what was Maillol seeking in these different sculpture materials?

[Antoinette Le Normand-Romain](#) – Unlike most sculptors of the day, Maillol did not train in a master's studio as an assistant or apprentice sculptor responsible for carving works in stone and marble. He learned the craft “on the job” by carving the stone for *Mediterranean* in 1905. He criticized marble for “its overly rich sheen”. Although some stones were too brittle and chipped when chiselled, he preferred them for their “sort of velvety, oily softness, which is pleasing to the eye, for a certain suppleness too, which does the chisel's bidding”. Rather than spotlessly white, delicate Italian Carrara marble, he chose coarse pink French marble from the Canigou massif (Pyrénées-Orientales) for the *Monument to Cézanne*, and stone for *The Mountain* and *Île-de-France*. When his two *Mediterraneans* are juxtaposed, the importance of the material in the end result and perception of the work is highlighted.

In 1905, small works for collectors were cast in bronze by the art dealer and editor Ambroise Vollard. He called on the services of several casters. Ever the perfectionist, Maillol had no qualms about reworking the chasing himself.

For works designed to be installed outside, he had a fondness for lead, which he admired in the sculptures in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, as its matt finish made it possible to retain the clarity of the forms he had modelled. Maillol flew into a rage when he discovered that Eugène Rudier had taken advantage of his absence from Paris from 1940 to 1944 to produce a bronze cast of the group *Prairie Nymphs*.

1926
Kessler publishes Virgil's *Eglogues* illustrated by Maillol with the Cranach Presse.

1928
Venus with a Necklace is exhibited at the Salon d'Automne.

1929
The *Monument to Cézanne*, rejected by Aix in 1925, is installed in the Tuileries Gardens.

1930
Travels to Germany with Count Kessler (Frankfurt, Weimar, Naumburg, Dornburg, Berlin).

1931
Kessler sells *Mediterranean*.

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Édouard Vuillard,
The Anabaptists: Aristide Maillol,
1931-1934, reworked in 1935-
1937, oil on canvas, distemper,
116 × 140,5 cm,
Paris, musée d'Art moderne

5
Study for the *Monument to Cézanne*, also known as the First study for *Aix*, circa 1907-1910, terracotta edition, 15,2 × 15,2 × 4,3 cm, Paris, galerie Dina Vierny

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Île-de-France, also known as *Young Girl Walking in Water*, between 1925 and 1933, stone, 152 × 50 × 55 cm, Roubaix, musée d'Art et d'Industrie André-Diligent - La Piscine

1933

Inauguration of the *Monument to Debussy* in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and the *War Memorial for Banyuls*. The French State buys *Île-de-France* (stone), which is placed in the Musée du Luxembourg.

1934

Dina Vierny makes Maillol's acquaintance and becomes his model.

1937

Maillol finishes *Prairie Nymphs* (which he began in 1930) and works on *The Mountain*, commissioned by the Musée d'Art moderne for the Universal Exhibition.

1938

Commission for a *Monument to Henri Barbusse* (which will become *The River*). Travels in Italy (Rome and Florence) with the sculptor Gustave Pimienta, Clotilde,

and his son, Lucien Maillol. Begins work on *Harmony*, which continues until his death. Commission for *Air for the Monument to the Glory of the Pioneer Crews of the France-South America Line*

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What were Maillol's main public commissions?

Antoinette Le Normand-Romain – On several occasions, Maillol was tasked with producing monuments to illustrious men, usually intended for the public space in their home towns. These initiatives were generally organised by committees of influential figures. But instead of the portrait they expected, Maillol presented disconcerting female allegories. This was the case with *Action in Chains* (1907) for the *Monument to Auguste Blanqui* (Puget-Théniers, Alpes-Maritimes); this revolutionary was dubbed *L'Enfermé* (literally, the locked-up man) due to his many years of incarceration. Maillol's powerful allegory in the form of a female nude caused on a scandal.

Maillol often had to contend with frostiness and incomprehension from committees. His *Monument to Cézanne*, a project launched in 1907 for the town of Aix-en-Provence, was not inaugurated until 1929, and then in a completely different location: the Tuileries Gardens in Paris! Maillol added drapery to this semi-recumbent Fame figure holding a palm in her outstretched hand to adapt her for his *War Memorial for Port-Vendres*, in the Roussillon (1923). War Memorials for the neighbouring towns of Elne (1921) and Céret (1922), were also based on earlier figures. His native town of Banyuls, where he would spend his winters, did not commission one from him until 1933. Although he went on to create the monument for the musician Claude Debussy (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1933), recognition from the French State in the form of commissions was slow: *Mediterranean* in marble (1923-1927), and *The Mountain* in stone for the Universal Exhibition of 1937, when Maillol was 76 years old!

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Action in Chains, Monument to Auguste Blanqui, 1907 (model); pre-1937 (cast), bronze, 215 × 97 × 90 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay

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Seated Woman, also known as Mediterranean, 1905 (model); 1905-1910 (stone), limestone, 114 × 78 × 107.5 cm, Winterthur, Sammlung Oskar Reinhart "Am Römerholz"

(installed in Toulouse in 1948).

1939

Withdraws to Banyuls. Dina Vierny travels back and forth between Paris and Banyuls to continue posing for him.

1942

Attends the inauguration of the Arno Breker exhibition in Paris.

1943

Jean Lods shoots *Aristide Maillol sculptor* in Banyuls (film released in 1944).

1944

Maillol dies in Banyuls from his injuries in a car accident.

1946

Special tribute at the Salon d'Automne in Paris.

How would you define Maillol's art?

Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat – Maillol admired what was known at the time as “Primitive art” in the broad sense of the term: Egyptian art, archaic and classical Greek art, and the sculptures in Olympia in particular. In terms of modern art, he admired Paul Cézanne whom he believed to have “that sense of the ensemble which creates unity”.

He pursued unity, simplicity, synthesis, but also the architecture of forms: “A sculptor is man who is in love with forms [...] And beyond forms, there is also architecture, which brings these forms together.” He mastered these qualities through a long process of memory and maturation of his subject.

By moving away from the particular to achieve a form of universality, he thought of his works first and foremost in terms of their formal beauty, without worrying about the subject. He presented his future *Mediterranean* with the simple title *Woman* at the Salon d'Automne in 1905, with the deliberate intention of preventing any subject from interfering with the aesthetic assertion of pure form. In his report on the Salon d'Automne of 1905, the writer André Gide, wrote of *Mediterranean*: “She is beautiful; she does not signify anything; this is a silent work. I think you have to go back a long way to find such total neglect of any preoccupation other than the simple manifestation of beauty.”



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Mediterranean, 1905 (plaster model); 1923-1927 (marble), marble, 110,5 × 117,5 × 68,5 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay



How was Maillol viewed in the 20th century?

Antoinette Le Normand-Romain – Maillol was celebrated by the Vichy government as the leading figure in French sculpture.

Although he was not interested in politics, he was a great Germanophile; the Germans had been his first patrons since the very start of the century. During the war, he played host to those who visited his studio in Banyuls to which he withdrew during the fighting. He agreed to return to Paris in 1942 for the inauguration of the exhibition devoted to Arno Breker, the official sculptor of the Third Reich, as he was keen to cross the demarcation line into occupied territory to check on the state of his studio in Marly-le-Roi (Yvelines). His reputation was rightly tarnished by this trip. In the post-war period, this unfortunate event and his aesthetic did him a disservice. His work was viewed as the culmination of a long tradition which had failed to renew itself. A few voices were raised in his defence and the magazine *Arts* published an article entitled “A Truly Free Man” to mark the centenary of his birth in 1961. “His art does not campaign, it does not seek to prove anything. It exists, perhaps it is only just beginning to exist, and I believe that in a century we will not be surprised to see that one of his works was created in the same year as one by Picasso.” Maillol is very visible in Paris now due to initiatives spearheaded by Dina Vierny, his last model. She was the driving force behind the group in the Carrousel Gardens.

Curatorial Team

Opélie Ferlier-Bouat, Director of the Musée Bourdelle, Paris, and Heritage curator
Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, Honorary Director General of the Institut National d'histoire de l'art, and Honorary chief heritage curator

Exhibition in special partnership with the Fondation Dina Vierny – Musée Maillol

Exhibition organized jointly by the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, the Kunsthaus Zurich, and La Piscine, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André-Diligent, Roubaix.



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Exhibition tie-in events

Tours

Audioguides (French, English)

For all audiences, 6 €/4 €

Childrens 3,50 €

Guided tours led by experts (90 minutes)

From 19 April to 2 July 2022

Tuesday 2:30pm

Wednesday, Friday, Saturday

11:30am

Thursday 7:30pm

Adults, 6 €/4.50 €

Online events

On the museum website, the Petits M'O kids' website exhibition catalogue

Musée d'Orsay/Gallimard joint publication, 352 pages, 45 €

Programme and bookings
musee-orsay.fr



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Dina posing for *The River*, preparatory drawing, 1938, pastel, charcoal, chalk on mounted wrapping paper, 85,5 × 130,5, private collection