

# The Patroness

IRIS CANTOR and her late husband were the world's foremost private collectors of Rodin. The North Carolina Museum of Art is the newest beneficiary of their lifelong passion. *BY DAVID MASELLO*

*PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS LOOF*

"I was aware that a major gift of Rodins would inspire a lot of people to come visit this museum in Raleigh," says Iris Cantor, shown here in the newly opened Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Court and Garden.

**RIS CANTOR** was keeping her visitor waiting. Lawrence Wheeler, director of Raleigh's North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA), had shown up at Cantor's Park Avenue duplex with something to ask her.

"I knew exactly what I wanted back then in 2004," says Wheeler, "but it was a bit nerve-racking waiting for her to come into the living room. I wasn't sure how she was going to respond. I knew her, from our earlier meetings, to be a tough—but also fair—character."

Wheeler was also aware that as one of America's most generous and far-reaching philanthropists, Cantor was used to being asked to give all the time,

and when he came home in his museum, I thought, 'I like this kind of person. Someone who comes out of the blue and says straight on what it is he wants. That takes gumption.' I knew right away we were on the same page."

Wheeler, the director of the NCMA since 1994, had long known that the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation owned hundreds of the best and most iconic castings of Rodin sculptures, all of which were, as he says, "works of art without a museum home." Indeed, these bronzes of such pivotal pieces as *The Thinker*, *The Kiss* and *Monumental Torso of the Walking Man* had spent years traveling from museum to museum in a kind of artistic exile, with one of their galleries of call being Wheeler's. In 2000, Wheeler had organized a show, "Rodin: Sculpture From the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collection and Additional Works," that attracted more than 300,000 visitors. This was an unprecedented attendance record for what was essentially a regional museum, albeit one that contained an enviable collection of European paintings ranging from the Renaissance to the 19th century, many of which had been given by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in 1960, including a prized Giotto.

"When we saw the draw that show had," says Wheeler, "I thought, 'Let's try to give the Rodins a home here in North Carolina.' I came to Iris Cantor to ask her for some of them."

Although Cantor quickly embraced what she calls the "magnificent obsession" with Rodin that her late husband, Bernie, developed after a visit he made to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946, she insists that she is a mere "caretaker of the world's largest private Rodin collection," one that eventually numbered 750 pieces. Before their marriage in 1977, she hadn't known much about Rodin. "I learned to love Rodin because if you didn't love Rodin, you couldn't be around Bernie," she says. "I made a point to understand the artist. Soon I realized why my husband liked Rodin so much—for the strength, the passion, the sensuality that comes through in the sculptures. I learned to love Rodin for all the rea-

though her gifts to institutions as diverse as UCLA, New York University, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Hospital of Paris were often wholly of *her* choosing rather than in response to a request.

"I did keep Larry waiting," recalls Cantor, "but maybe just fifteen minutes. I was upstairs getting dressed, and when I came down, I could tell he was nervous. He had called my foundation office in Los Angeles to set up an appointment to come see me in New York. I said to myself, 'What is he going to want?' But the moment I heard him explaining that he wanted some of my foundation's Rodin sculptures to have a perma-

nent home in his museum, I thought, 'I like this kind of person. Someone who comes out of the blue and says straight on what it is he wants. That takes gumption.' I knew right away we were on the same page."

A monumental cast of *The Three Shades* is the courtyard's focal point. "For the first time in history, a sculptor used three identical figures to express his subject," says David Steel, curator of European art. Opposite: The main entrance to the West Building.



Rodin's Monumental Head of Pierre de Wissant depicts one of the burghers of Calais, who offered his life in 1347 to save his besieged city.



“Bernie once referred to his obsession with Rodin as a love affair,” says Cantor.

sons my husband did. Bernie once referred to his obsession as a love affair.” And through her exposure to Rodin, Cantor says, she developed a particular love for the Belle Époque: “The paintings of that time always tell a story I like—an early Sunday dinner with family or an afternoon tea or a magnificent ball.”

By the time their living-room chat was over, Cantor had said to Wheeler, “How would you like a monumental *Thinker*?” Eventually, Cantor would give twenty-nine Rodins (and one work by Camille Claudel, Rodin’s celebrated mistress and muse) to the NCMA. “Larry picked out twenty-five pieces he liked,” says Cantor, “but I thought that number was going to look a little meager in the gallery.”

“The Cantor gift of the sculptures was *the* catalyst for making this new building happen,” says Daniel Gottlieb, the NCMA’s director of planning and design, referring to the 127,000-square-foot, \$73 million West Building, which opened to the public in April. “And Larry Wheeler is *the* reason this building got built.” Wheeler’s charisma and influence in North Carolina, and not just in the Triangle (Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill), was decisive in securing \$67 million in funding from the state. Among the most dramatic features of the decidedly minimalist one-story building, designed by New York–based architect Thomas Phifer, is the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Court and Garden. The light-filled gallery is a forest of plinth-mounted Rodins, their dark, mottled forms emerging in full, expressive relief. Beyond the gallery is an outdoor courtyard, defined by six of the monumental sculptures, arranged around a contemplative pool and stands of bamboo that rustle in the Carolina breeze.

This embrace of natural light and nature was an architectural prerequisite. “We wanted to create a building that accepts people and accepts light and has a kind of diaphanous quality,” says Phifer. Three hundred sixty-two skylights infuse the galleries with controlled natural light and bathe the artworks in a glow, with no worries about the pieces being harmed by direct sun. At the building’s dedication, Linda Carlisle, North Carolina’s secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, remarked, “Any museum can make you look, but a great museum like this one changes the way you see.”

“I made no stipulations about the design of the gallery,” says Cantor. “Larry has such magnificent taste and style that I knew it would all be okay, and when I saw the completed space just before the inauguration, I was right. Listen, I’m a girl from Brooklyn. I grew up going to the Brooklyn Museum, which was practically in my backyard [in 1987, she and her husband gave fifty-two Rodins to the Brooklyn Museum], but I felt very comfortable giving to North Carolina. When I first went down there to see the installation of the show in 2000, I was *really* taken with the place and the public’s enthusiasm for the artworks. I’ve never seen such festivities.”

## Curator’s Choice



DAVID STEEL, curator of European art at the North Carolina Museum of Art, helped organize an exhibition in 2000 of some 120 works by Rodin, half of which were borrowed from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation. Iris Cantor subsequently donated twenty-nine sculptures; Steel comments here on three of his favorite Rodins in the museum’s permanent collection. Additional commentaries are related in Steel’s book *Rodin: The Cantor Foundation Gift to the North Carolina Museum of Art* (NCMA Publications; \$20).

**Eve** (above; 28” x 10” x 10½”). “Rodin’s contemporaries tended to portray Eve as a paragon of unspoiled, perfect beauty, tinged with innocence and eroticism. He conveys her vulnerability and shame so that she becomes a *person* rather than a distant figure.”



**The Cathedral** (right; 25¼” x 12¾” x 13½”). “These arched hands bring to mind the vault of a Gothic cathedral. The fingers lightly touch, nearly joining in prayer, and the space between them is

mysterious, evocative. It is surprising that Rodin used two right hands to form this intimate pairing.”



**I Am Beautiful** (left; 27¾” x 12” x 12½”). “Rodin created this during the height of his intense relationship with the sculptress Camille Claudel. At first glance, it appears to portray a couple swept up in the throes of joyful, erotic passion. Upon closer examination, the sculpture reveals emotional complexities, even contradictions.”



The landscape architect for the museum project, Walt Havener, chose plant materials that he calls "abstracted, simple and neutral, as a way to draw out the bronze coloration of the sculptures." The pool muffles traffic noise.

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Cantor and her husband started giving away not only Rodin sculptures (an estimated 450 by the time of his death, in 1996) but also sizable sums of cash after they established their philanthropic foundation, in 1978. By then the investment firm of Cantor Fitzgerald, which Bernie had cofounded (and where Iris served as vice chairman), was among the biggest and most profitable of such companies on Wall Street. “Bernie once told me, ‘Iris, this foundation will take you anywhere and everywhere,’” says Cantor. “Well, it recently took me to North Carolina. But it’s also taken me to Singapore. To Australia. To Japan. And many, many other places in the world.”

“And I was about to add Queens, but Tony Bennett would kill me if I said the borough name instead of Astoria, the

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neighborhood where he grew up,” she continues, referring to her membership on the board of Exploring the Arts, an organization Bennett established in 1999 to build the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Astoria. The school is topped with the Iris Cantor Roof Garden, certainly an impressive amenity, though it does not rival her more celebrated—and public—Metropolitan Museum of Art roof garden, which opened in 1987.

Cantor’s own magnificent obsession—to the delight of universities, hospitals, cultural institutions and scholars whom she finances to write museum catalogues—is her philanthropy, an endeavor she has embraced with the fervor of a collector. For New York University, she funded the

Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Film Center in 1997 (the on-site restaurant, Faye's Café, she had named for her mother), and last summer Cantor agreed to fund a new performing-arts theater for the university's Tisch School of the Arts, a venue that will be called the Iris Cantor Theatre. The facility, for which construction has yet to begin, marks one of the instances in which a project bears just Iris's name. "If a particular cause was important to me," says Cantor, "Bernie wanted me to put just my name on it. Most of the art-related things, you'll notice, carry both of our names. We would always make the naming decision together. As for this new theater at Tisch, the minute Mary Schmidt Campbell [dean of the school] talks about something, I just say yes. I can't resist."

Family has long been one of the inspirations for Cantor's giving. After her younger sister died from breast cancer, she established the Iris Cantor Center for Breast Imaging at UCLA in 1986 and later the Women's Health Center at the university, followed by another such facility in 2002 at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center. In 2012 the Iris Cantor Men's Health Center is scheduled to open at the hospital. "Establishing a place like this has been on my mind for a long time," she says. "I can't tell you how excited I am about it. Men don't go to doctors unless their wives or girlfriends make them. Just as women love the idea of a women-only health center, so, too, are men going to love one that's just for them. When it comes to giving, you have to be passionate about the cause. You can't just write a check. You have to know what you're doing and getting involved with. You need to ask questions and say yea or nay."

Her breadth of involvement is so vast that when asked how she keeps track of it all, Cantor says with a laugh, "You know, when I look at all the work my foundation does, I want to say, 'That is one terrific woman—I want to meet her!'" ❖