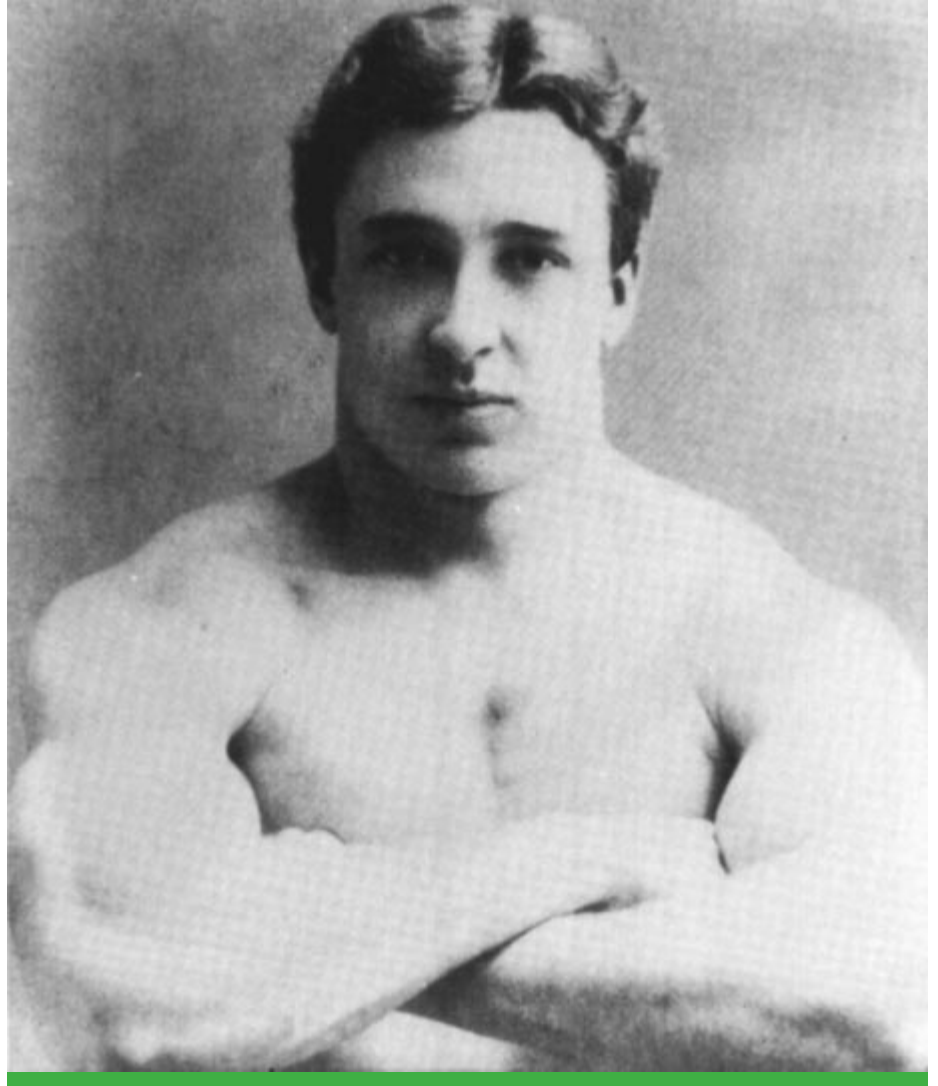


THE ATHLETE AS MODEL



Samuel S. White in 1902.

The Rodin Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art possesses a major collection of works by the famous French sculptor, surpassed only by that of the Rodin Museum in Paris. A decisive role in its foundation and subsequent development was played by Mr Samuel Stockton White III, sportsman, businessman and art collector.

By Ramón Balius Juli

Samuel Stockton White III, son of a wealthy businessman, Mr J. Clarence White, was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1876. At the Germantown Academy, he soon distinguished himself by his interest in physical education and his remarkable physique. Several years later, he was one of the most important members of the Princeton University gymnastics team. At the end of the nineteenth century, Sam White was a popular young man in Philadelphia, especially in athletics circles. In 1898, when the United States declared war on Spain, he enlisted as a volunteer and was transferred to Chickamanga with the First Regiment. His war did not last long, as a series of untimely fevers caused him to be repatriated. As soon as he recovered his health, he travelled to England, entering a Cambridge college where he was able to pursue his sporting activity with success.

THE STRONGEST MAN

In Cambridge, his athletic prowess caught the attention of Eugene Sandow, Director of the Sandow Academy (devoted to cultivating physical development, the body-building of the day), who became his mentor and coach. In 1899, he won the Sandow medal, awarded to the strongest and most perfectly developed man in the United Kingdom. During those years, Mr. White made a number of journeys, especially in Europe, and twice attempted to swim across the Hellespont (the ancient name of the Dardanelles), in the company of Dr. William White of the University of Pennsylvania. He failed on account of a wave of cold weather and an epidemic. At that time, as we learn from a chronical which appeared in "The Philadelphia Sunday Press" of 16th March 1902, Sam White had a perfectly proportioned physique, measuring 1.75 m and weighing between 77 and 81 kg.

In 1901, on the occasion of a trip to Paris, a friend suggested to Mr. White that he pose as a model for Rodin, an artist who was at the peak of his international fame and whose admiration for and interest in male muscle development was well known. We know the circumstances of his meeting with Rodin thanks to a letter he

sent to a friend, published in the above-mentioned chronicle, to a reference which appeared in the Philadelphia "Evening Bulletin" in 1926, and to a letter he wrote to Mrs. Marley Mason in May 1949.

When he was introduced to Rodin, the artist, after extolling the beauty of his torso, arms, shoulders and back, which, he claimed, were very important for his artistic work, accepted him as a model. This is how the sculpture known as the "Athlete" or the "American Athlete", in allusion to the origins of Mr Samuel White, came into being.

A NATURAL POSE

It was some time before the master found a pose to his satisfaction. To begin with, "He had me walking around his studio while he studied me from all angles. Finally, he asked me to adopt a natural posture as I chose. I sat on a chair in the easiest and most natural position, resting my arms on my legs. Rodin was satisfied with it, and set to work immediately." This story seems to indicate that the position of "the athlete" was not inspired by "The Boxer" (a bronze in the National Museum in Rome), as Denys Sutton suggested in his book "Triumphphant Satyr, The World of Auguste Rodin". Rodin could only have known this work from photographs, which was not easy at the end of the nineteenth century, as, although he visited Rome in 1876, "The Boxer" was not discovered until 1884.

In his work, Rodin used small balls of clay, which he held in his left hand and placed with his right, "with an infinite sense of detail...While he worked, he was excited and very temperamental... Some days, he said barely a word...When I started to pose, I expected nothing, but after about a week, Rodin told me that he was thinking of giving me a plaster model of the work. After a few days, I asked him whether it would be possible to make a copy in bronze at my own expense. To my surprise and satisfaction, he told me that he would give me a bronze model. It was fantastically generous of him, as casting is expensive and Rodin is not rich...When it reached America, the work would have

*First version of 'The Athlete'.
Rodin Museum (Philadelphia).*





Samuel S. White III in 1910, by Man Ray.

*"The Philadelphia Sunday Press".
March 1902.*

considerable value, over one thousand dollars..."

In his letter of 1902, Mr. White included two photographs taken by himself, which are reproduced in the article mentioned above, one of Rodin beside the door of his studio and the other of the plaster work, still unfinished.

After a number of sessions -we do not know how many - Samuel White returned to London, although, as he wrote to a

friend, he hoped to pose for Rodin again one day. He did indeed return to Paris and posed again in 1904.

TWO VERSIONS

There are two versions of the "American Athlete". The first, the one Rodin gave to Mr. White, in which the head is looking forward, and the second in which the athlete has his head turned to the left as you look at him. It is obvious that the model for both versions was the same, but I would venture to point out that the anatomical characteristics of the two are not the same. The second version does not show the extravagant muscular development of the first, and there are other differences of detail such as the parting of the hair. The second version was probably done in 1904, when Samuel White may have reduced his training regime. A note which appeared in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin in 1926 under a photograph in which Mr. White is seen with this second version states that he posed for the work in 1904.

A number of specimens of the first work exist in slightly different sizes. The most frequent measures 40 cm and has a smooth, shiny finish and a dark colour. These characteristics are shared by those in the Rodin Museum in Paris, the Stanford University Art Gallery, a private collection in Beverly Hills and Samuel White's own collection, as well as the one acquired two years ago by the International Olympic Committee; Rodin's signature appears on all of them, in different places. There are also various specimens - five or six in private collections - 39 cm high; one of them, which is owned by the International Olympic Committee, has a matt finish and is slightly lighter in colour.

The second version is 43 cm high, is dark coloured and shiny and has the signature A. Rodin and the name of the smelter Alexis Ridier of Paris on the base. It seems that specimens of this version are to be found in the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia, the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation in Stellenbosch and three private collectors in New York, Santa Barbara and Washington. In a collection in Oyster Bay, N.Y.,



there is a 48 cm version which was acquired from Rodin by Mr. Nickerson in 1913. Although to a layman it may seem that there are lots of known specimens and variants of the "Athlete", it should not be forgotten that this is undoubtedly one of Rodin's least widespread works if we compare it with what happened with better known sculptures as in Meudon.

It is interesting to note the relaxed and easy attitude of the "Athlete", which is a contrast with the tense attitudes of other works by Rodin such as "The Bronze Age", "Man Walking" or the "Thinker" himself. This fact has been interpreted as a profound change in Rodin's aesthetics, although it is also conceivable that a professional model may find it difficult or impossible to adopt the relaxed and absent pose which comes so naturally to the athlete, who concentrates before performing his feat.

Sam White never abandoned sporting circles, and there he met Jules E. Mastbaum, an important cinema operator and philanthropist. As his colleague, Albert Rosenthal, relates, Mr. Mastbaum became "crazy" about Rodin and began to acquire his works in Paris, at first through agents and then personally. When Mastbaum died in 1926, his collection stood at 108 items, among them the second version of the "Athlete". The Rodin Museum was opened in 1929, in accordance with its founder's ideas.

The Whites carried on working to keep and expand the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Samuel as member of the Board and Vera as administrator. After Mr. White's death in 1952, Vera made a number of donations, and when she died in turn, the entire collection went to enrich the Museum's artistic store. Logically, the "Athlete" given to Samuel White by Rodin went into the Rodin Museum, which is the only collection in the world to possess both versions of the work. They are displayed facing one another in the same room.

The history of Mr. Samuel Stockton White III and Rodin's "Athlete" is a clear demonstration of the strength which flows from the marriage of art and sport, beginning with the inspiration of a work of art and culminating in the creation of an entire museum.

*Second version of 'The Athlete'
(with head turned).*

