

“CAMILLE CLAUDEL: A LIFE”

by Odile Ayrál-Clause, Harry N. Abrams, 2002

Reviewed by Steven Marx

Camille Claudel: A Life, by Cal Poly Professor of French Odile Ayrál-Clause, is an extraordinary achievement a decade in the making. Hailed by reviewers all over the world, “this first fully researched biography of Claudel abolishes the myths attached to her life and asserts the brilliance of her art.”¹ I came upon it by chance, in an obscure corner at El Corral Bookstore, but once I started reading, I wound up sitting on the floor for an hour, unable to put it down.

A scholarly study of the French sculptor who was a disciple and mistress of Rodin and the subject of a popular 1989 film, Ayrál-Clause’s book combines original research, vivid writing, and engaged though balanced judgement. *Camille Claudel* interweaves material from archival sources, unpublished letters and photographs, and an extensive range of secondary studies into a seamless narrative. It tells the story of Claudel’s achievement and suffering, one which follows the familiar trajectory of a woman doomed by her refusal to fit into the expectations of early twentieth century patriarchal society. Without editorializing or exaggeration, Ayrál-Clause takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride of hope, admiration, suspense, grief and outrage.


The book’s opening chapters chronicle the adventures of an extraordinarily talented girl from the French provinces coming to live in Bohemian Paris during the 1880’s with the support of her family. Its central chapters focus on her friendship with her fellow sculptor, Jesse Lipscomb, and her turbulent relationship with Auguste Rodin. These chapters also explain the development of her personal style and include interpretive descriptions of her major works, enriched with dozens of striking photographs. The

final third of the book reads as a classic tragedy. It begins with the onset of mental illness and climaxes with an unforgettable account of Claudel being dragged off to an insane asylum at the insistence of her mother and brother at the moment that her protective father died—a moment which coincided with the outbreak of the first World War. The last few chapters, detailing her fruitless efforts to escape the horrendous conditions of her thirty-year-long imprisonment, show how a strong family incapable of dealing with the mental illness of one of its members degenerates into a network of cruelty and betrayal.

Here is a sample of Ayral-Clauses's modest yet evocative prose:

The shift in Camille's works from large pieces to small scenes may also have meant more than a mere attempt to separate her art from Rodin's. As innocent as they may appear, these small scenes harbor disturbing elements; squeezed into a corner or dwarfed by their environment, the small characters reflect the shrinking world of Camille as she increasingly withdrew, soon to live in complete isolation. In *La Vague* [The Wave], three women hold hands as they are playing in the water. But they are suddenly surprised by an immense wave which towers and curls and threatens to swallow them. Crouching and looking up, there is nothing they can do to prevent the catastrophe from happening. The wave holds them up like toys in a huge hand ready to close.²

In addition to biography and art criticism, Ayral-Clause's book provides a sixty-year survey of French social history that deals with politics, religion, gender, and the economics of government-supported art. At the levels of state, family, and individual, it delivers instructive parables about the workings of vanity, lust, bigotry, and greed. And among others, it paints memorable portraits of the two power players in Camille Claudel's life—Rodin, the most celebrated artist of his generation, and her brother, Paul Claudel, a lionized writer and diplomat—revealing both “great men” as small human beings.

Selected by the prestigious publisher of art books, Harry N. Abrams, *Camille Claudel* is beautifully designed and meticulously crafted. As a result of its success, Ayral-Clause has been nominated to write part of the *catalogue raisonné* of a major new exhibition of Claudel's work. 

Notes

1. Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the U.S., “Books,” *Frenchculture.org: The World of French Culture in the United States*, May 2002, <<http://www.frenchculture.org/books/release/art/ayralclaudel.html>> (20 October 2003).

2. Ayral-Clause, Odile, *Camille Claudel: A Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 140.