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The Kiss (Le baiser), reduced 1898

- Gilded bronze, F. Barbedienne Foundry
- 10 x 5⁵/₈ x 6¹/₄ in. (25.4 x 14.9 x 15.9 cm)
- Signed on base, left side: A. Rodin
- Inscribed near bottom, right side: F. Barbedienne, fondeur
- Provenance: Feingarten Galleries, Los Angeles
- Gift of the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, 1974.107

Figure 167

When Rodin first exhibited the enlarged marble version of *The Kiss* in the May Salon of 1898, it was a critical and popular success, unlike his *Monument to Honoré de Balzac* which was shown at the same time. That year Rodin entered into a 20-year contract with the foundry Gustave Leblanc-Barbedienne to make from the marble four differently sized reductions in bronze. Under this contract 329 casts were made and sold.¹ In 1919 the founders were convicted by a French court of having continued to cast reductions of *Le baiser* after Rodin's death in November 1917. The foundry was forced to desist and to turn over the models and unsold casts to the Musée Rodin, and the owners went to prison. There is no way of knowing how many illegal casts were sold.

The Barbedienne casts were reductions made by foundry technicians probably from a plaster that in turn was made from the marble version in 1898, as it was Rodin's practice to have plasters made after a suc-

cessful carving as a record or to be used for enlarging and reducing into bronze and to allow the reducers to mark up the plaster when taking measurements. There is no indication that Rodin was in any way involved in this process. That he entered into such a contract was acknowledgment of the work's popularity and his desire not to tie up his own staff's time making reductions.² He did not want to invest his own resources into casting a large edition and exhibiting it in his studios because this would have made him look like a merchant. Rodin did not believe in the practice of the limited edition for bronzes or the economics of scarcity. All through the nineteenth century, foundries like Leblanc-Barbedienne made commercial editions of reductions of famous sculptures; they called themselves bronze editors.

When matched with the bronze cast of the original one-half life-size version, the Barbedienne reductions seem woefully inadequate in terms of the loss of detail and vitality. Gone are such subtleties as the interval between the lovers' lips, Paolo's hesitant gesture on Francesca's thigh, and all sense of bone in his right hand. Francesca's gestures are not the same as in the bronze, and she has no navel; the book is not as clear; and it is as if Paolo is wearing a short skirt. The base on which the couple sits is more rocklike but less related sculpturally to the figures themselves. The reductions became only a souvenir of a great work. This drastic difference is partly explained by the fact that the life-size marble was itself an enlargement made directly in the big stone by the carver Jean Turcan from the smaller original version. Rodin complained to Edmond de Goncourt in 1888 that he did not have the time to make a life-size version in clay, which would have allowed him to make a number of changes.³ The Barbedienne casts are thus literally Rodin third-hand.⁴