

# ARISTIDE MAILLOL: THE SCULPTOR, THE MAN AND HIS MUSE

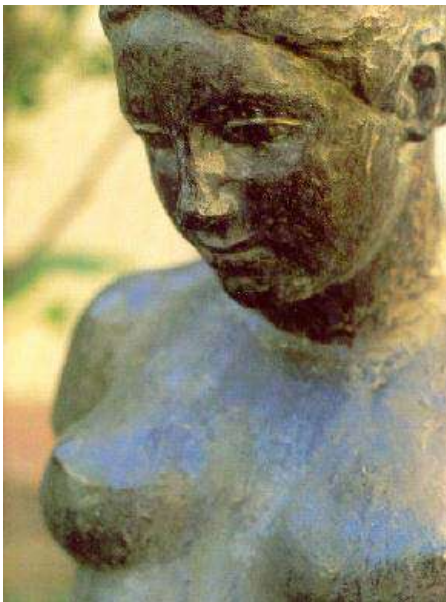
**The eminent artist's last model, Dina Vierny, has dedicated herself to preserving and perpetuating the legacy of his life's work**

"You'll see," Dina Vierny had said in Paris in the Maillol Museum, which she had established with such perseverance and stocked with examples of a lifetime's range of the famed sculptor's work. "He's alive. He will be with us in Banyuls."

Aristide Maillol died in 1944. It had taken Vierny, Maillol's last model, some 30 years, from when she first had the idea of the museum, to finally open its doors to the public in 1995.

We were to fly down to Banyuls-sur-Mer in southern France, where Maillol was born and where he died. Banyuls, south of Perpignan, is only about nine miles--by the precipitous hairpin road that skirts the Mediterranean--from the Spanish border. The Alberes Mountains squeeze down toward the sea; just beyond them rises the massive Pyrenees range and wilderness.

It is a land once colonized by Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians. The native language is Catalan. Just across the border, Catalonia has become an autonomous region of Spain, famous for breeding poets, painters and sculptors.



When Aristide Bonaventure Jean Maillol, a Catalan peasant, was born there in 1861, Banyuls was a fishing village with some small holdings of grapes and olives and a steady trade in smuggling across the border.

After you have been in the rooms of the house in which Maillol worked and died; have been in his garden, now restored as he planted it; have walked into the hills where he built a large studio, which Vierny has converted into another Maillol museum--you know what she meant. He had once told a friend: "My village, which I love more than anything I have ever seen, has every resource to offer a painter--it's as if a golden dust had been scattered over the entire area."

Maillol's spirit is very much there, in Banyuls. He might leave it for Paris for six months of the year, but the other half, until the day he died, he lived in Banyuls.

In 1934 Dina Vierny, then 15, received a letter from out of the blue. It came from Aristide Maillol, the renowned sculptor, and it was to change both of their lives. Maillol, then 73, had written at the suggestion of the architect J. C. Dondelle, who was a friend of Dina's father, a pianist.

"Mademoiselle, I am told that you resemble a Maillol or a Renoir," he wrote. "I will be happy if it's a Renoir," he added modestly. Maillol presided over Sunday gatherings at his home and studio in Marly-le-Roi, just outside Paris. He went on to invite the young student to come see him there.



*Maillol and Dina Vierny, here in 1944, knew each other for ten years. His model and muse, she posed for such works as the bronze 1941 study for Harmony (left).*

She wandered in, not knowing what to expect; she was hardly aware of who he was. There, among artists, writers and composers of near or equal stature, were Andre Gide, novelist and memoirist; and the poets Paul Valery and Paul Claudel. "You go there," Vierny recalls, "you look around, see the long beard. 'I'm the girl who has come to see you.'" It was the wrong beard, an easy mistake in that company, in that time. Finally, she met Maillol.

"I was 15. His wife didn't like all the models around. But she was very nice to me. She agreed that I looked like the work he was doing. Nothing astonishes you when you are young. Now I would be terrified."

This is somewhat hard to believe. After spending several days with Vierny in Paris and Banyuls, it is clear that she is, at 77 now--older than Maillol when she first met him--a major force in her own right. The lineaments that Maillol saw are blurred by time, but the intensity and vivacity, the sheer forcefulness of her personality, are compelling, at times overwhelming.

Vierny wears the ribbon of a commander of the French Legion of Honor for services rendered to the culture of France. Not the least of these, in addition to the two museums, was the gift of 18 major Maillol sculptures to the nation, a grand exercise she executed with Andre Malraux, Charles de Gaulle's Minister of Culture, in 1964. Later, she added two more, for a total of 20. Today, these inhabit the Carrousel Garden of the Tuileries facing the Cour Napoleon of the Louvre, which is glimpsed through the marble-columned triumphal arch of the Carrousel.

Maillol had once written to the influential writer and critic Octave Mirbeau, an early admirer and supporter of his, "What I want is a garden, a huge garden; and I shall immediately people it with statues which will proclaim the glories of Zola's life and work for ever, among the flowers. . . . for I am a gardener too, you know." Mirbeau had been suggesting him for a commission to memorialize Emile Zola. He didn't get the commission, but there is a garden now, peopled with his statues.

Like almost all of Maillol's sculptural work, they are female nudes, none of which would make it in Vogue, although they are quite at home in the galleries of the world's major museums. There are people enough, critics and other authorities, who now and then have criticized Maillol for continuing to explore the possibilities of one subject, the feminine form. That's like saying an apple by Cezanne is just another piece of fruit.



*Harmonious bronze  
Venus (1918-28) graces  
square in Perpignan*

Maillol's search was for the common thread that so subtly stitches together three-dimensional shapes in space. If you look long enough at a Maillol sculpture you will forget that it is of a nude woman and fall under the spell cast by the forms. His memorials to the war dead, for example, are not of guns and cannon, or men on horses. They are of bereavement, of loss enveloped within the universal form of a single woman, a mother, a feminine ideal.

The monument to the war dead in the mountain village of Ceret, about 30 or so miles from Banyuls, says, simply: "A ses enfants/Mort pour la France" (To her children/Dead for France). It is of a seated woman, her head bowed. "One can express grief with motionless features," Maillol once said, "but not with a twisted expression and wide-open mouth."

### **Fishing boats painted on a tablecloth scrap**

Maillol had not intended to be a sculptor. He began by drawing. His great-grandnephew Yvon Berta-Maillol, who today makes fine wine on Maillol land outside of Banyuls, recalled family tales. "There were no shops in those days for artist's materials in Banyuls," he said. "Maillol took the scissors from his mother's sewing basket, cut out the center piece of the tablecloth and painted his first work on the back. It was of fishing boats. He was 13." There was, added Berta-Maillol, quite a scene when it came time to set the table.

When he was 20, Maillol took drawing lessons in Perpignan, about 22 miles from Banyuls. From there, after he felt he had absorbed all he could, he went on to Paris. He had very little money, an allowance of 20 francs a month, from his devoted aunt Lucie in Banyuls. His life in Paris was hard; he had no friends, and each time he tried to pass the rigorous examination of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he failed. But he persisted, auditing drawing courses at the

Beaux-Arts given by leading academician Jean Leon Gerome, which could be done without being an enrolled student. When Maillol showed his work to Gerome, the teacher glanced at it and said, "You know nothing! Go to the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs and work on noses and ears."

A year later, at age 21, Maillol did go to the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs, where he worked very hard. Still virtually penniless, he was undernourished and suffered from rheumatism. Although hospitalized several times, he continued to work at his art. Finally, in 1885, he passed the exam at the Beaux-Arts.

For five years Maillol studied at the school and visited the great museums of Paris, where he copied works by Chardin, Fragonard and Rembrandt. He was a slow but methodical worker. Unable to buy canvas, he painted on jute sacks mounted on stretchers. It was, in its difficult way, typical of the life of young and not-so-young artists in Paris, where the bohemian life was not exactly the romantic existence it seems when viewed from a distance.

Eventually, Maillol made friends and--excited by the new art then appearing--drew away from the conventionalism of the Beaux-Arts (but never away from the solidity of its training). In particular he was excited by the flat, pure colors and forms of Gauguin. "Gauguin's painting was a revelation to me," he said. "Right then I told myself that what I did would be good when it had Gauguin's approval."

At about that time, inspired by the medieval tapestries in Paris' Cluny Museum, Maillol became interested in tapestry making. In 1893, he set up a petit-point tapestry workshop in Banyuls where he employed Angelique and Clotilde Narcisse, who were sisters, to work for him. For pigments, he ground local plants he himself had gathered in the hills. A year later, Maillol returned to Paris. Clotilde soon followed. They set up house together, and later married and had a son, Lucien.

One of Maillol's tapestries, on exhibit in Brussels, caught Gauguin's eye—a dream come true. "Maillol is showing a tapestry which cannot be praised too highly," Gauguin wrote in an art journal. But Maillol worked so intensely on his tapestries, which required hours of meticulous labor in artificial light, that he seriously strained his eyes. He actually lost his sight for a time, and afraid he might lose it permanently, he gave up tapestry making. And so, at the age of nearly 40, he finally came to sculpture. It was a late but momentous arrival.

By this time, Maillol had met a number of young and active artists, writers and poets in Paris, especially the group known as the Nabis, which included painters Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. Returning from a visit to Banyuls, he showed these artists some of the small terra-cotta figures he had recently made there. Vuillard, impressed, introduced him to Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard, who bought several of his sculptures and had them cast in bronze. Encouraged, Maillol began to work intensely with clay and bronze, creating some 30 statuettes in one year.



*Carved in stone, Grief (1921-23) honors war dead of Ceret. The River (1938-43) seeks repose in the Tuileries.*

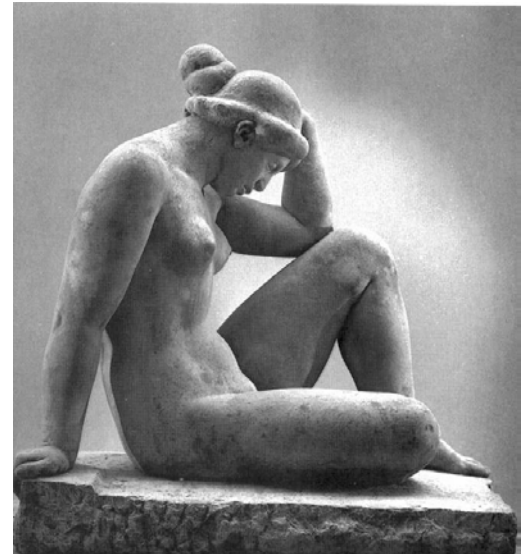
In 1902, Vollard gave Maillol his first one-man show. One of the sculptor's entrancing little figures, *Leda*, caught the eye of Octave Mirbeau, who eventually bought it. Mirbeau showed *Leda* to Rodin, who was widely regarded as the great sculptor of the era, a towering figure in the life of France. Rodin--whose work, in direct contrast to Maillol's, concentrated on leashed energy and dynamic contortions--was greatly impressed with the purity and "luminousness" of Maillol's technique."

The other day," Mirbeau wrote to Maillol, "Rodin came here. He picked up your *Leda*, just as I had done, and looked at it intently, examining it from every angle, turning it round in every direction. 'It is most beautiful,' he said; 'what an artist!' He looked at it again, and went on: 'Do you know why it is so beautiful and why one can spend hours looking at it? It is because it makes no attempt to arouse curiosity.' And there was a look of melancholy in his eyes. 'I do not know . . . of any modern piece of sculpture that is of such an absolute beauty, an absolute purity. . . .'"

At the Salon d'Automne of 1905, the exhibition that introduced the Fauves to the world of avant-garde art, Maillol first showed a plaster of his nude entitled *The Mediterranean*. Andre Gide wrote of the Salon: "One goes up to the first floor to a smallish room, in the middle of which Monsieur Maillol's large seated woman is to be seen. She is lovely; she doesn't signify a thing. She is a silent work of art. One has to go far back in time, I believe, to find such a complete indifference to any concern foreign to the simple presentation of beauty." Over the years, Maillol would do several versions of this work, which many consider to be his masterpiece. It was to be his breakthrough to worldwide recognition.

With *La Mediterranee*, writes Bertrand Lorquin, curator of the Maillol Museum in Paris and author of a recent book on the sculptor, "Maillol heralds Brancusi's radically simplified volumes and Henry Moore's dislocations." The work represented the break between Rodin's 19th century and Maillol's beginning of the 20th.

For Maillol, indeed, straddled two centuries, spending about half his life in each, pointing the way to what was to come. Renoir, one of the masters of the 19th, took up sculpture himself after sitting for a masterful portrait head by Maillol. Matisse, who led the way to what was to become new in the 20th--his only peer was Picasso--so admired Maillol's work that he helped Maillol in wetting clay, an experience that later led to the creation of superb sculpture of his own.



### A secret escape route to Spain

*La Mediterranee. 1901*

Maillol left Marly-le-Roi and Paris for Banyuls in September 1939, the year World War II began. There he continued to work on sculpture, painting and, as always, drawings. Fleeing the Nazi occupation, the great harpsichordist Wanda Landowska visited Maillol in Banyuls on her way out of France. John Rewald, whose book on Maillol was published in 1939, also stopped to visit before he left France in 1941.

During the seven years that Vierny had known Maillol in Paris, she had posed for three masterpieces, *The Mountain*, *The River* and *Air*, as well as for innumerable drawings and paintings. After coming to Banyuls in 1940, she posed for *Harmony*, his last sculpture, which he worked on for four years but never finished.

Vierny, who had been connected with a Resistance group in Paris, found Banyuls, so close to the Spanish border, a convenient place from which to help fugitives escape from the Nazis. Maillol offered his workshop in the hills as a way station, showing her a hidden path over the mountains to Spain. In the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., there is a letter that documents Vierny's work. It was written in 1967 by Varian Fry, the American consul in Marseilles during the war. Fry had organized the American Rescue Center, which helped people escaping from the Germans in France. In his letter, Fry refers to the "Aristide Maillol-Dina Vierny" route over the Pyrenees; it led from Maillol's studio in Banyuls to the frontier station at Port Bou. "You remember, I'm sure," Fry wrote, "that we used to send certain refugees to Maillol's studio, that Maillol himself had shown Dina Vierny, his buxom young model, the footpath over the Pyrenees to Port Bou, and that, on moonless nights, Dina used to lead the refugees over the Pyrenees by that route, to avoid the French border patrols."

Maillol spent his last years in the countryside around Banyuls, painting, drawing, working on his sculptures. "I'm enjoying myself," he told an early biographer, Judith Cladel, who had also written the definitive biography of Rodin; "nothing is eternal. People have a mania for thinking they're heroes! . . . One doesn't kill oneself for botching a work; one makes another one."

In 1944, on his way to visit a friend, the painter Raoul Dufy, Maillol was injured in a car crash on a mountainous road. He died soon afterward in Banyuls; he was 83.

Maillol's estate went to his wife and son, but the sculptor left a number of his works to Vierny and had made it clear that he wanted her to be the custodian of his legacy and art. His son, Lucien, in turn, gave more of Maillol's work to Vierny, and upon Lucien's death, the entire estate went to the former muse and model.



In 1947, Dina Vierny opened an art gallery on the Left Bank and built a successful business dealing in contemporary art. The idea for a museum in Paris devoted to Maillol came to her about 1964, during the time she was negotiating with Andre Malraux for the Tuileries project. Vierny never stopped working on the concept until it became a reality.

The crumbling 18th-century building on the Rue de Grenelle called the Hotel Bouchardon, in which Vierny once occupied an apartment, is now part of the Maillol Museum. In front of the museum is a protected (and rightly so) national monument, the grandiloquent *Fountain of the Four Seasons*, created c. 1750 by sculptor Edme Bouchardon. Rising to a height of about four stories, the facade at the entrance to the museum forms a sweeping semicircular backdrop of neoclassical columns and pediments, with sculpted figures in niches.

Over the course of more than two centuries, the three buildings behind this imposing facade were a convent, a cabaret, a fish market, a photograph agency, apartments and studios. It took Vierny 30 years to purchase these buildings, set up a foundation, receive permission for renovations and, finally, empty the buildings of tenants and build the museum.

Designed by architect Pierre Devinoy, who also oversaw the renovation of Maillol's workshop for the little museum in Banyuls, the Maillol Museum opened in 1995. Devinoy created a four-story, light-filled, graceful structure of stone, wood and glass containing 27 galleries. Beneath a rough-hewn beamed ceiling, the entrance gallery confronts you quietly with its walls of white plaster and irregular stonework. It is filled with masterpieces. The immensity of *The River* and *Liberty in Chains*, the circulating grace of and the simplicity of *Grief* are overwhelming.

*The River* is massive, a figure on her side, her head lunging downward, limbs askew; it seems miraculous that, somehow, it appears to float. With all of its drama of size and gesticulation of arms and limbs, the figure is in balance. The relationships of arms, legs, head, feet and shoulders with each other and with the torso, all contained within a defined space, express Maillol's calm and harmonious view of the world. The body becomes a way of finding balance in the world. "One forgets," said Rodin after studying a Maillol sculpture, "that the human body is an architecture, a living architecture."



*The Three Nymphs*

Vierny has kept a small apartment and office in the upper reaches of the museum complex, and close by her always there is a little sculpture in bronze, the study for another of Maillol's major works, *Night*. The diminutive nude is just seven inches high, and Vierny urges me to pick it up. I can feel the contours, how its volumes are balanced one against the other. I can feel Maillol's hand, his fingerprints. I can feel the life within it, its harmonious rhythm.

Besides the full survey of Maillol's oeuvre, the museum's galleries display works by his contemporaries and friends. These include Matisse, Bonnard, Gauguin, Redon, Rodin and Dufy. There is an entire gallery of drawings that Matisse made, using Vierny as a model; another gallery of Dufy's drawings; and a superb painting of Vierny by Bonnard. There are also exhibits on Surrealism, Dada and French primitivism; a small room devoted to the art of Marcel Duchamp and his two brothers, Raymond Duchamp Villon and Jacques Villon; a collection of work by avant-garde Russian painters, discovered by Vierny when they were virtual outlaws, before the Soviet Union collapsed; and a gallery reserved for current exhibitions.

You would think that all this might be enough to keep Dina Vierny fully occupied, but lately the idea of transforming Maillol's home and studio in Marly-le-Roi has been on her mind. The buildings are in very bad condition; architect Devinoy shakes his head in despair when he thinks of what has to be done and at what expense. In addition, work on the Paris museum is ongoing. Only two of the complex's three buildings are finished and open to the public.

So, Vierny is selling her collection of dolls and automata, called by the Art Newspaper the "Rembrandts of the doll world," at Sotheby's in London. And, at Druout's—which is France's version of Sotheby's—she will sell her

renowned collection of manuscripts and autographs. (Both collections have since sold, bringing in a total of more than \$30 million.)

She is telling me of these plans back in Banyuls, as we eat dinner in the house next to Maillol's. Vierny had bought this house in order to preserve the common garden that the two houses share. Maillol's house is being restored by Devinoy so that the public may come and walk through his rooms, see the place where he worked, look out the upper windows toward the Mediterranean as he must have done.

Yvon Berta-Maillol is there; we have been drinking the wine he makes. We are eating off Maillol's dishes. We are at the dessert stage. We eye the plum tart.

"Go ahead," says Dina Vierny, her dark eyes sparkling. "Enjoy yourself."

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**By Bennett Schiff**

**Contributing editor Bennett Schiff has written most recently for these pages on the art treasures from Taipei's National Palace Museum, in March 1996.**