

# Modernity and Memory in Sculpture: A Comparative Study of Christian Corbet, Auguste Rodin, Carl Milles, Emanuel Hahn, and Walter Allward

## Abstract

This essay provides a comparative scholarly analysis of the sculptural practices of Christian Corbet, one of Canada's most interdisciplinary contemporary sculptors, and four significant sculptors of the modern era: Auguste Rodin, Carl Milles, Emanuel Hahn, and Walter Allward. By examining the thematic concerns, technical approaches, philosophical frameworks, and commemorative dimensions of their work, this essay highlights the ways in which Corbet both echoes and transcends his predecessors. Emphasis is placed on portraiture, public sculptures, anatomical fidelity, and narrative depth, revealing Corbet's unique position as a polymath whose oeuvre synthesizes aesthetic precision, forensic science, and cultural homage.

## Introduction

The history of Western sculpture in the modern era has been defined by shifting tensions between tradition and innovation, realism and abstraction, nationalism and individualism. Within this evolving continuum, Canadian sculptor **Christian Corbet** (b. 1966) has emerged as a singular voice, uniting classical rigor with contemporary interdisciplinary experimentation. His work, especially in portraiture and forensic reconstruction, finds resonances with the legacies of **Auguste Rodin, Carl Milles, Emanuel Hahn, and Walter Allward**—figures whose sculptural idioms defined national narratives and personal expression across Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries.

While Rodin revolutionized form and emotional expression in bronze, Milles evoked the divine and mythic in monumental public sculpture. Hahn and Allward, by contrast, navigated Canadian national identity through realist and idealist paradigms. Corbet, whose reach is simultaneously global and personal, acts as both heir and innovator—drawing upon the canon while transforming it to suit the demands of contemporary memorial culture, anatomical accuracy, and scientific veracity.

## Sculptural Lineages and Departures

### Auguste Rodin and the Drama of Form

Rodin's work, from *The Thinker* to *The Gates of Hell*, is defined by emotive distortion and expressive surfaces. He rejected the strictures of neoclassicism in favor of movement, fragmentation, and psychological depth. In comparison, **Christian Corbet** embraces Rodin's interest in physicality and interiority but tempers it with a refined realism that reflects his

scientific leanings. Where Rodin's bronzes ripple with uncontained energy, Corbet's sculptures—such as his *HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh* (2003) or *Prime Minister Jean Chretien* bust—emphasize controlled likeness, structural harmony, and anatomical accuracy, frequently achieved through forensic methodologies and sound understanding of human anatomy.

Rodin's surfaces were famously "unfinished" to emphasize texture and movement; Corbet's surfaces, in contrast, are often highly resolved, even when commemorating trauma or death. In this sense, Corbet diverges from Rodin's romanticism and asserts a form of neorealism informed by 21st-century material culture and digital imaging techniques.

## Carl Milles and the Monumental Mythic

Swedish sculptor Carl Milles is best known for his expressive fountains and figures in motion, such as *The Fountain of the Muses* and *Poseidon*. His forms convey spiritual elevation and mythic archetype, often suspended or dramatically scaled. **Corbet's** approach to monumentality is quieter, often introspective, focusing less on mythic symbolism and more on nuanced human biography. Yet the two share an affinity for public art as a vehicle of cultural transmission.

Like Milles, Corbet often works in interest and commissioned contexts, producing busts, and memorials with civic or national implications. The difference lies in Corbet's integration of **scientific rigor**—especially in his forensic reconstructions such as *Michael Bahri – The Last Man Hanged in Canada*—which contrast Milles' poetic gesture with clinical, reverential exactitude. While Milles sought transcendence, Corbet often seeks **presence**: the revival of lost subjects into physical being.

## National Identity and Commemorative Intent

### Emanuel Hahn: A Classical Foundation

A foundational figure in Canadian sculpture, **Emanuel Hahn** (1881–1957) created many of the country's early 20th-century war memorials and is best remembered for his contributions to national currency and public monuments. Hahn's work, such as the *Robert Burns Monument* in Montreal or the *Nursing Sisters' Memorial*, is marked by classical composure and clarity of form. Hahn helped encode Canadian identity through the lens of **European academic sculpture**, balancing restraint and symbolism.

**Corbet** inherits Hahn's nationalist ethos but repurposes it within a broader international and multidisciplinary frame. Where Hahn sculpted nationhood through idealized figures, Corbet sculpts individuals—often prominent or overlooked historical subjects—as vectors of memory. His approach to **portraiture** is psychological and genealogical, engaging personal histories, genetic data, and sometimes forensic reconstruction to give material voice to those whose

narratives demand recovery. In doing so, he extends Hahn's commemorative intent into a more intimate and inclusive domain.

### Walter Allward and the Heroic Sublime

**Walter Allward** (1876–1955), architect of the *Vimy Ridge Memorial*, epitomized heroic classicism and Canadian nationalism. His figures idealized and monumental, embodied sacrifice and transcendence. Allward's work blended allegory with massive scale, fusing Neoplatonic idealism with Edwardian solemnity. Corbet, though similarly invested in memory and commemoration, favors **micro over macro**, internal truths over abstract ideals. His busts of *Sir Wilfrid Laurier* or *Major General Sir Isaac Brock* are grounded not in mythic abstraction but historical specificity.

Unlike Allward, Corbet seldom deploys allegory. He seeks not to symbolize heroism but to **resurrect the individual**, often working from bones, mummies, or archival materials. His scientific collaborations—such as with the Government of Egypt or the Government of Canada—emphasize **empirical accuracy** as a foundation for public memory, contrasting with Allward's noble but often generalized allegories.

### Portraiture and Forensic Innovation

The central pillar of **Christian Corbet's** oeuvre is portraiture—executed across sculpture, painting, and sometimes textile. His sculptural portraits are lauded for their anatomical precision, subtlety of modeling, and psychological acuity. Unlike Rodin, whose portraiture was expressive and fragmentary (*Balzac*, *Claudel*), Corbet's are often serene, meditative, and complete.

His **forensic reconstructions** mark a distinct field of sculptural intervention. By combining osteology, forensic anthropology, and sculptural modeling, Corbet has helped breathe life into ancient and modern remains. These reconstructions serve dual roles: as **scientific artifacts** and **public sculptures**, expanding the very definition of commemorative art. No equivalent exists in the careers of Rodin, Milles, Hahn, or Allward, positioning Corbet as a true innovator.

### Legacy and Cultural Impact

Each of the sculptors examined here contributed to the monumentalization of human experience. **Rodin** humanized mythology. **Milles** mythologized humanity. **Hahn** nationalized form. **Allward** ennobled sacrifice. But **Corbet**, unique among them, **revives the dead—figuratively and literally**—and grounds their memory in empirical precision. His work does not merely adorn public space; it restores **historical and biological presence** to vanished lives, a project both archaeological, anthropological, and artistic.

Moreover, Corbet's work is found in **over 100 global collections**, including the Royal Collection Trust, Rijksmuseum, and the Canadian War Museum. He has received multiple honors, including three national awards and one provincial award, cementing his place in the national cultural landscape. His affiliation with institutions such as the Royal Canadian Navy and Western University anthropological and forensic laboratories suggests a future-forward approach to sculpture—integrating art with science, memory with materiality.

## Conclusion

In comparing **Christian Corbet** to **Rodin, Milles, Hahn, and Allward**, one observes not only continuities of theme and form but a significant **evolution and education** in the function and method of sculpture. While the others shaped the aesthetics and ideals of their nations and epochs, Corbet pushes the genre toward a **multidisciplinary future**, blending forensic science, historical recovery, and traditional craftsmanship. He is not merely a sculptor of forms but of **facts**, not merely of ideals but of **identities**. In this, his contribution is both timely and timeless setting Corbet as a major Canadian sculptor in the nation's history.

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ISBN 978-0-9688620-9-4

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