

MEDARDO ROSSO

PIONEER OF
MODERN SCULPTURE

In order to understand the degree of innovation represented by the work of Medardo Rosso (Turin, 1858-Milan, 1928) his contributions require reassessing from a present-day perspective. It is only in this way and by casting a contemporary gaze that we can truly appreciate the influence exercised on modern and contemporary sculpture by a creative figure who has not received the recognition he merits by western art history. Through a selection of this Italian artist's most experimental works the present exhibition aims to present Rosso's radical artistic project in a context - that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries - dominated by the academic tradition and the presence of great names such as Auguste Rodin.

In this artistic climate, in which sculpture was expected to express universal values, Rosso aimed to transmit the impressions and emotions arising from the observation of his surroundings. His creations are thus founded on shifting aspects and subjective sensations which appeal to the viewer's senses and on which he persistently worked by returning to the same thematic groups over the course of his career. These "revisited" works are, however, unique pieces into which the artist introduced important material, formal and technical variations. The potential offered to him by a new medium, photography, contributed to emphasising that initial impression which inspired him to approach the creation of a work through the exploration of qualities of light and the importance of the viewpoint from which it is seen.

By focusing on these aspects Rosso questioned the physical limits and the materiality of sculpture, concepts which had two key consequences for the subsequent development of art. Firstly, the relationship between the object and its surrounding space, as for the artist the work was inseparable from its context, occupying it and modifying it, to the extent that essential aspects of traditional sculpture such as the pedestal disappear from his oeuvre.

Secondly, in the course of this exploration Rosso defended a break with the classical divisions between the different artistic disciplines. The technique employed should not define the type of artist. The creative process is understood as transversal given that like painting, his sculptures are not intended to be walked round and should be viewed from a single viewpoint. In parallel, through the medium of photography Rosso fused sculpture and vision into an inseparable whole by definitively proposing a new mode of perception that questions the physical presence of the object and explores its diffusion in its surroundings.

The radical nature of these concepts acted as a powerful catalyst for the work of subsequent creators who were the first to champion Medardo Rosso, an artist misunderstood in his own time whom we are now presenting from the viewpoint of our contemporary gaze.

Gloria Moure
Curator

***IMPRESSIONE D'OMNIBUS* [1884-1885]**

IMPRESSION OF AN OMNIBUS

According to Rosso himself the sculptural group depicted in this series of photographs was smashed during transport to an exhibition in Venice. In order to create it the artist made use of five local people travelling on an omnibus as his models. Rosso was generally inspired by ordinary, often humble or marginalised individuals, while his depictions of them aimed to grasp a fleeting vision of abandonment, innocence or poverty. In this sense, his intention was not to reproduce a scene but rather to capture abstractions of those concepts.

Although the work was lost, when Rosso left Milan and settled in Paris he took with him the photographic record that he had made of both the group and each of its individual figures. Years later he presented some of these photographs together with his sculptures in exhibitions such as the Autumn Salon of 1904, taking various photographs of the installation from which he subsequently produced photomontages. Experimentation with this new medium also allowed Rosso to emphasise the modernity of his creations in comparison to those of Auguste Rodin by including images of the latter's works in his exhibition installations and photographic montages.

LA PORTINAIA [1883]

THE CONCIERGE

Rosso's portrait of the doorkeeper of his home on Via Montebello in Milan is considered the first work in which he succeeded in transmitting his new aesthetic ideas. From this point onwards his experimentation focused on the production of sculptures with diffused and fragmented outlines. They are characterised by their two-dimensional nature - the fact that they are not modelled on the back determines the viewpoint from which they have to be seen - and by a concern to integrate them into the surrounding space. In the two versions of this work (including the original in plaster), which are seemingly very similar but also very different to each other, Rosso maintains his mental impression of the subject. As a result, he moves away from the traditional representational method and proposes a new type of contemplation that is totally subjective and based on emotion.

The term "impression" does not imply that Rosso was an Impressionist sculptor, a label that has sometimes been applied to him. Rather, his approach was to abstract what he saw and retain it in his memory for subsequent, repeated development, both in his thematic groups and his photographs of them.

BOOKMAKER [1894]

While there is no unanimous agreement on the identities of Rosso's subjects, this figure has been associated with Eugène Marin, the son-in-law of Henri Rouart, one of Rosso's most important friends and collectors, depicted outdoors at the Racecourse at Auteuil, leaning on his stick and holding a pair of binoculars.

As with *L'uomo che legge*, the figure emerges from an enormous, unformed mass of material and thus questions the use of a pedestal characteristic of academic sculpture. This device also allows the work to be integrated into its surrounding space.

The pronounced diagonal formed by the bookmaker emphasises the sensation of instability and makes the figure a direct precedent for one of the most celebrated works of Italian Futurism, Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* of 1913. Once again, this idea of movement aims to fuse the sculpture with its surroundings in order to create a visual continuity between them.

Rosso generally located his sculptures on stands resembling stools of varying dimensions according to his specifications (a type of display that has been used for this exhibition). This ensured that they would be seen from a specific viewpoint, which was the one from which the artist himself had gained his first impression.

BAMBINO MALATO [1893]

SICK BOY

This bust of a sick boy seems to capture a concrete reality rather than the ideas of an abstract nature which Rosso aimed for. “In this work one still perceives the material too much”, the artist observed in an interview of 1923.

This persistence of a material quality largely explains why *Bambino malato* is undoubtedly one of the most classical of the sculptures that the artist produced after 1883.

As evident throughout the exhibition, Rosso completed his creative process by taking photographs. Those that he took of *Bambino malato* led him towards the de-materialisation that he was so concerned to achieve. They are experimental images which make use of manipulation, cropping, inversion and even colour. Rosso saw no difference between sculpture, painting and photography, thus anticipating the break with the traditional canons regarding the division of the arts, which was not definitively established until the 20th century.

AETAS AUREA [1885]

THE GOLDEN AGE

Medardo Rosso and Giuditta Pozzi's only child, Francesco, was born on 7 November 1885 in Milan. The deterioration of their relationship and Rosso's move to Paris in 1889 resulted in a distancing between father and son that lasted many years. This undoubtedly affected the artist, who produced numerous sculptures of children over the course of his career.

Aetas Aurea, created that same year, is the first of Rosso's works which directly relates to his personal life. With exceptional freedom, it depicts the moment when a mother kisses her child, their faces completely fused. As an image, however, it avoids the sentimentality characteristic of traditional depictions of mother and child groups by focusing on a fleeting, everyday and intensely private moment.

***CARNE ALTRUI* [1883-1884]**

FLESH OF OTHERS

The three versions of the depiction of a prostitute exhibited here (in wax, bronze and plaster), in addition to the associated photographs, constitute different ways of materialising the work. Employing a frontal viewpoint, the wax and the plaster show the face of a woman which emerges from an unformed mass, giving the sculpture its strength and creating a type of halo that expands in the surrounding space. One of Rosso's innovations was the use of wax and plaster for final versions of a work, which was not a habitual practice as these materials were generally part of a working process in which the definitive sculpture was cast in bronze.

In some cases years passed between Rosso's creation of a sculpture and its exhibition, or between an initial version and a subsequent one, as if time was of little importance once it had been made as the piece could be returned to repeatedly. Replicas and variants thus follow with no precise chronological order.

MALATO ALL'OSPEDALE [1889]

SICK MAN IN THE HOSPITAL

Executed shortly after Rosso moved to Paris in June 1889, *Malato all'ospedale* is the result of the “impression of a convalescent” whom the artist saw while he himself was a patient at the Hospital Lariboisière.

The figure emerges from an unformed mass. The sick man in a chair and the ground on which they rest blend together and take over the space without reducing the emotional impact of the initial impression. “I made full use of the atmosphere, as you can see. This is a problem I’ve solved, making sculpture without forgetting the atmosphere and the breadth in space”, Rosso observed in a letter of 1903.

The bronze was first exhibited in 1893 at the gallery of La Bodinière theatre with the title *Après la visite* [After the visit] and the artist selected one of his photographs of it to illustrate his essay in Edmond Claris’s book *De l'impressionnisme en sculpture. Auguste Rodin et Medardo Rosso* (1902). The German edition was promoted by the Dutch critic and writer Etha Fles, who played a key role in the dissemination of Rosso’s work in Europe. By this date the relationship between Rosso and Rodin, initially one of mutual respect and admiration, had ended.

L'UOMO CHE LEGGE [1894]

MAN READING

As in most of his works, here Rosso depicts a motif from everyday life, a standing man seemingly reading a newspaper. In a manner comparable to *Bookmaker* there is a powerful connection between the figure and the space in which it is immersed.

The quest for de-materialisation is evident in the bronze sculpture in the Palazzo Pitti, in which the base on which the reader stands resembles a fragile sheet of paper after Rosso worked it with a hammer following its casting.

Photographic experimentation was fundamental for *L'uomo che legge*. Rosso manipulated the developing process using photochemical and mechanical means, obtaining tonal changes and irregularities which make each photograph unique. The pronounced diagonal that dominates the sculpture is similarly emphasised in the photographs through the artist's radical cropping of them.

GRANDE RIEUSE [1891]

LAUGHING WOMAN (LARGE VERSION)

Shown alongside a photographic plate modified by Rosso himself, *Grande rieuse* was conceived a year after *La Rieuse*, which is generally known as *Petite rieuse* in order to distinguish it from the former, which is larger. Using more defined modelling and retaining some echoes of the academic tradition, here Rosso explores the power of a smile to modify facial expression. It has been suggested that the subject is an actress from the Paris Casino, while other experts have proposed that the model is Ida, the sister of the cabaret singer Bianca Garavaglia, the model for *La Rieuse*.

Both works illustrate Rosso's interest in depicting modern Parisian individuals and urban spaces. This was a theme that inspired other artists of the time such as Honoré Daumier, Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

LA RIEUSE [1890]

LAUGHING WOMAN

This sculpture depicts the cabaret signer Bianca Garavaglia, known as Bianca di Toledo in fin-de-siècle circles in Paris. Rodin owned a version of this work, which he acquired in an exchange with Rosso for his famous *Torse* of 1879.

Convinced that the appearance of an object or person is subject to constant change, Rosso was aware that he could reproduce nothing more than the impression of a moment, an endeavour that became an endless process. The artist made numerous works on the subject of a smile. In this case his interest in expressing the profundity of the emotions means that the subject is progressively reduced to a very simplified mask. The series of five photographs that he took of the group also reveals his interest in movement as these images, displayed alongside each other, anticipate the logic of film and resemble a cinematographic sequence.

BAMBINO EBREO [1893]

JEWISH BOY

Rosso produced numerous versions of this young boy, of which nine are displayed here. The importance of the treatment of the material for the creation of these variations is clearly evident and makes each one a unique piece. This aspect was fundamental for the artist at a time when sculptors such as Rodin headed large studios and had their works cast at professional foundries. Rosso, in contrast, worked alone and cast his sculptures himself in his studio. Through this approach he emphasised his own role in the execution of his creations and questioned the artist's loss of control over the process.

Rosso cast and sold *Bambino ebreo* more times than any of the other sculptures he created in Paris. It was the work that most appealed to the tastes of the innovative but cautious collectors who “saw a Renoir, but not on canvas”, as some experts on the artist have noted.

There is no unanimous agreement on the identity of the subject, depicted with a concern to express psychological implications that are not present in any of Rosso's other child sculptures, such as *Bambino al sole* and *Bambino alle cucine economiche* which do not depict real models.

***ENFANT AU SEIN* [1889]**

CHILD AT THE BREAST

Following his arrival in Paris and through his friend Felice Cameroni, Rosso met and mixed with most of the city's intellectuals, including the industrialist and collector Henri Rouart, Émile Zola, Edmond de Goncourt and the poet Paul Alexis who commissioned him with a portrait of his wife. Rosso described the subject as the “impression” he received when he saw the baby girl at its mother's breast.

The first version of Marie-Louise breastfeeding her daughter retained approximately recognisable forms, but in subsequent variants Rosso removed the head from the sculpture and cropped it from his photographs. The original motif thus disappears in favour of the creation of an organic substance of congealed lava. Rosso continued this quest for the unformed and the passing of time through his photographs of the work: creased, crossed out, erased and repainted pieces of paper and negatives accompany this sculpture.

BAMBINO AL SOLE [1891-1892]

CHILD IN THE SUN

“We are nothing more than interplay of light” Rosso observed on one occasion, which is what he seems to have aimed to capture in *Bambino al sole*. The work’s title suggests his interest in the optical effect of sunlight as it falls on the boy’s face while generally emphasising the role of light as an unstable factor that creates tonalities.

Bambino al sole also shows how Rosso manipulated the surfaces through the coexistence of smooth and irregular zones in his effort make the light give the work a pictorial character. In addition, in the different versions shown here (in plaster, wax and bronze) he combined areas of material of different tones and added a range of oxidation and different alloys to the casting in order to ensure that it is the materials themselves which directly reproduce the effect of light.

***HENRI ROUART* [1889]**

Shortly after he arrived in Paris Rosso met the engineer and art collector Henri Rouart who became an important benefactor. It is not known whether this portrait was a commission or if Rosso produced it in thanks for the help received from his patron, who also bought a number of his sculptures.

The image is dominated by the marked disproportion between the head and body, which spreads out to occupy the surrounding space. This imbalance brings to mind some of Alberto Giacometti's sculptures with their exaggeratedly small heads and elongated, flattened torsos, as well as the work of Lucio Fontana and his investigation of space in relation to setting.

It was through Rouart that Rosso met Edgar Degas, among others. Both artists were very interested in photographic experimentation. The use of this new medium for practical or documentary purposes spread rapidly in the last quarter of the 19th century, aspects that had a major impact on the art world. Eadweard Muybridge's images, Nadar's photography and above all Rosso's relationship with Degas were of enormous importance for encouraging his interest in photography, while he and Degas shared similar ideas on the unity and interaction of the different artistic languages.

***MADAME NOBLET* [1897]**

MADAME NOBLET

This portrait depicts Anne Lostau-Noblet, wife of the doctor and collector Louis-Sylvain Noblet whom Rosso had known since 1896. The work is notable for the enormous freedom with which the artist approached a commissioned portrait. The image oscillates between the human face and its disappearance, the features buried in a mound of material with the marks of the spatula left clearly visible on its surface. The figure's neck disappears and the head connects directly to the body.

In the associated photographs Rosso emphasises the importance of controlling our viewpoint through the presentation of his work. The photograph displayed here of the sculpture in the artist's studio shows the setting carefully devised for its contemplation, in which the artist nonetheless aimed for the element of unveiling or discovery. This aspect was essential to emphasise the importance of the setting and viewpoint in the perception of the work. The other photographs, in which Rosso's framing precisely aligns Madame Noblet's head with the frame of the picture in the background, record the installation of the sculpture in an exhibition in Holland in 1901.

***ECCE PUER* [1906]**

BEHOLD THE CHILD

Ecce Puer is a portrait of the young Alfred William Mond, grandson of the British industrialist and collector Ludwig Mond who commissioned the work from Rosso in London in 1905. The result appears not to have satisfied Mond, who rejected it and Rosso subsequently retitled it *Ecce Puer*. It is also the last original subject devised by the artist, who from then on only reworked successive versions of earlier creations.

By this date Rosso had devoted years to exploring how to best express the different emotions aroused in him by aspects of everyday life, culminating with this work. The figure disappears and what remains is the memory of its gravity. The photographic work created in relation to *Ecce Puer* emphasises Rosso's artistic concerns: the importance of the viewpoint for recreating the aspect of light arising from perception, the quest for de-materialisation, and the realisation that everything relates to space.

Over time the work has become one of Rosso's most celebrated creations and among those that has aroused most interest among contemporary artists, including Juan Muñoz, Thomas Schütte, and Giovanni Anselmo, who described it as "a sculpture that denies and cancels itself."

LA CONVERSAZIONE [1896-1899]

THE CONVERSATION

In this sculpture, which only exists in the two versions displayed here, Rosso used the figures as mere pretexts to generate space. Two seated and one standing figure, all imprecisely modelled, engage in a conversation. As in other sculptures by the artist, the work dissolves into its base and it is that element which creates the landscape and setting. Rosso's interest in integrating his works into space was evident from his early period in Milan when he associated with the members of the Scapigliatura, who upheld the importance of the fusion of the arts and rejected spatial isolation of sculptures.

The relationship between the different parts of this group and of those parts with the surrounding space became a route for investigation pursued by numerous later artists, notably Alberto Giacometti, Lucio Fontana and Fausto Melotti.

The Conversation was possibly made after a visit to a garden in London, a city Rosso visited in 1896, although other experts have indicated that it was made in the summer of 1897 at the Noblet family's country residence in Jessains-sur-Aube. Never exhibited in Rosso's lifetime, it is the only one of his sculptural groups to have survived to the present day.

BAMBINO ALLE CUCINE ECONOMICHE [1893]

CHILD AT THE SOUP KITCHEN

Bambino alle cucine economiche depicts a child's face, barely modelled within a vast mound of sculptural material.

Executed in Paris, it has been interpreted as marking Rosso's return to the social themes that he had depicted during his youth in Milan, albeit characteristically avoiding a literal representation.

The rivalry between Rosso and Rodin in the late 19th century and the latter's enormous influence on the academic art world closed doors to Rosso with regard to access to collectors and participation in official exhibitions. The photographs that accompany the sculptures include a number taken by the artist of the installation of his works at the 1904 Autumn Salon in Paris. He was one of the founders of that event, which emerged precisely as a reaction to the official Salons to which he had almost no access.

In the images of the 1904 exhibition and in the subsequent photomontage it can be seen that Rosso presented his sculptures alongside photographic work relating to some of his earliest pieces, among them *Impressione d'omnibus* which no longer existed by that date, returning to his Milan years in a constant process of moving backwards and forwards throughout his career which gave new meaning to his work.

PARIS LA NUIT [1896]

PARIS AT NIGHT

Paris at night is a destroyed work that was never exhibited and is only known from photographs. Modelled in plaster on a large scale (2 x 3 metres), Rosso here applied himself to the creation of a sculptural monument. Rather than depicting a historical theme, however, he was inspired by the typically modern subject of three people walking along a street in Paris. He takes this break with tradition further through the radically forward-leaning slope of the figures and by showing them from behind, thus abandoning the frontal, centred viewpoint of traditional sculpture.

In 1900 Rosso made an unsuccessful attempt to exhibit *Paris at night* in Rodin's Pavillon d'Alma which coincided with the Universal Exhibition. After Rodin's refusal to show the work it was acquired by Dr Louis-Sylvain Noblet who installed it in the garden of his country residence where it gradually deteriorated due to exposure to outdoor conditions. It was subsequently irreparably damaged during World War I.

DRAWINGS

Interested in modern life as it unfolded before his eyes, Rosso found drawing a medium of immediate expression and one through which he translated his “impressions” onto paper. In his own words, he conveyed moments which “I succeeded in snatching from life” and which Baudelaire might have described as the capturing of “the transitory and fleeting aspects of present-day life”.

Largely executed in Paris and London, these drawings depict figures walking along the street, in railway stations, bars, restaurants and parks and on boulevards, all located in a wide range of atmospheric conditions and settings.

In addition, a significant number of Rosso’s drawings are depictions of landscapes, many of which border on abstraction. Notable among this group are the Alpine landscapes executed during his periods in Fribourg with Etha Fles during World War I.

Rosso worked in a spontaneous manner, producing rapid sketches on any type of improvised paper: used envelopes, advertisements and the backs of restaurant menus: supports that have irregular or trimmed edges and which emphasise the transitory nature of these compositions.