

MEDARDO ROSSO

PIONEER OF MODERN SCULPTURE



Fundación **MAPFRE**

Profoundly misunderstood in its own day although appreciated by the most advanced artists, the work of Medardo Rosso (Turin, 1858–Milan, 1928) now seems to us highly innovative and advanced for its time. Rosso, who opted to abandon his native Italy and escape from academicism in search of more cosmopolitan horizons in France, was a visionary whose most experimental work—the focus of this exhibition—proposed a break with the artistic tradition prevailing in turn-of-the-century Europe.



Ecce Puer [Behold the Child],
ca. 1920
Patinated plaster
Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio
© Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio

During his early years in Milan Rosso associated with a group of painters known as the Scapigliatura who had a significant influence on his sculptural praxis. Following his move to Paris in 1889 he established close contacts with intellectuals and artists such as Auguste Rodin, Amedeo Modigliani and Edgar Degas. He also became extremely interested in photography through Nadar and Eadweard Muybridge's experiments and made use of the medium himself as a further working method. Rosso's career in Paris was, however, overshadowed by the powerful presence of Rodin, to the extent that on the latter's death Guillaume Apollinaire wrote: "Rosso is undoubtedly now the greatest living sculptor. The injustice of which this prodigious sculptor has always been a victim is not being redressed."

Seen with the perspective of time, Rosso's most experimental output anticipates many of the concerns of subsequent artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Lucio Fontana and, in more recent times, Thomas Schütte. In contrast to the traditional concept of sculpture as an expression of the immutable conveyed through mass and volume, Rosso de-materialised his works while aiming to make them an expression of the memory left with him following the contemplation of a specific scene. In this intent to capture emotion he worked in the form of thematic groups, producing sculptures that seem identical to each other but which are not; in an almost imperceptible manner, from one composition to another he varied the space in which the works are located, the light that falls on them, the viewpoint and the amount of material from which they emerge.

Carne altrui [Flesh of Others], 1883–1884

Grey patinated bronze. Pieter and Catherine Coray Collection

© Pieter and Catherine Coray Collection



The artist repeatedly returned to these groups over the years, giving them new meaning and introducing a pictorial element. In many of his works Rosso focused on their two-dimensional nature - they are left unmodelled on the back, which determines the viewpoint and the height from which they should be seen - and on how to integrate them into the surrounding space. Through this approach he moved away from the traditional method of representation, proposing a new mode of totally subjective contemplation based on emotion.

In a transversal manner, sculpture, photography and painting thus come together in Rosso's output in a single creative process, with no discipline prevailing over any other. As already noted, this working method would become characteristic of many subsequent artists.

The contemporary nature of Rosso's creations make them almost abstract and profoundly innovative, their fragility revealing that of the world of his own time - and of ours. As such, he became one of the undoubted pioneers of modern sculpture.



Enfant au sein
[Child at the Breast], undated
Gelatin silver print

Private collection

The exhibition features nearly 300 works, including sculptures, photographs and drawings. Rather than following a chronological structure, it centres on the most celebrated sculptural groups created by the artist during his career. It also emphasises the idea that Rosso himself had of his work, which he saw as a practice that obliged him to repeatedly return to the same pieces, giving them new meaning on each occasion.

Conversazione in giardino [Conversation in the Garden], 1896–1897

Bronze. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Roma

© Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Roma



KEY THEMES IN THE EXHIBITION

1

MEDARDO ROSSO AS INNOVATOR

For centuries, sculptural tradition was based on the classical concept of that discipline, essentially decorative sculpture and the type used to exalt monarchs and illustrious individuals in the form of commemorative monuments. With the evolution of theories on this practice in the mid-19th century, many sculptors found that their work was not appreciated by the public and anything that did not adhere to the precepts of academic tradition was rejected. Rosso was the victim of this type of incomprehension.

While the sculptures he produced in the early years of his career were more to the taste of the art market, in 1883 he started to explore a new type of work that prioritised artistic creation as process and moved away from mimetic imitation of surrounding reality. These are the works that provide the focus of the present exhibition: revolutionary, free creations which considerably pre-date the ideas of the great 20th-century sculptors.



La portinaia
[The Concierge], 1883–1884
Wax
Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio

2

THEMATIC
GROUPS

From a specific point in his career and for nearly twenty years Rosso worked on variations and repetitions of a single work, either in the form of sculpture or photography. He made different versions of the same subject in wax, bronze and plaster. Each differs from the previous one although they derive from an initial impression. This becomes a spatial continuum, a creative process which the artist leaves open to the viewer's gaze.



Bambino al sole [Child in the Sun], 1892
Wax over plaster
Pieter and Catherine Coray Collection
© Pieter and Catherine Coray Collection



Bambino al sole [Child in the Sun], 1902-1908
Bronze
GAM - Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin
© GAM - Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin

3

MODELS

As models for his sculptures Rosso generally preferred the ordinary, often humble and marginalised individuals with whom he coincided in his daily life. This was not a new practice as it had become widespread in the late 19th century and was habitual with painters such as Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and with writers such as Charles Baudelaire, who referred to people of this type as the "heroes of modern life". Rosso's aim, however, was not to represent a scene but to capture an idea, a fleeting vision: abandonment, innocence and poverty were among the abstract concepts which he aimed to transmit and it is largely these ideas that give his sculptures the force which emanates from them.



Henri Rouart, 1890
Bronze
Kunst Museum Winterthur,
Galerieverein donation, 1964
© SIK-ISEA, Zürich (Jean-Pierre Kuhn)

4

**THE IMPRESSION,
WHICH IS NOT
IMPRESSIONISM**

In each of the different versions of his works Rosso aimed to retain his mental vision or “impression” of what he had seen. However, the term “impression” does not imply that Rosso was an “Impressionist” sculptor, as critics have sometimes suggested. Rather, he abstracted what he had contemplated and retained it in his memory in order to then develop it numerous times, both in his thematic groups and his photographs of them. As he himself noted on one occasion, “I have never been associated with the Impressionists, neither French nor foreign ones.”



Bookmaker, 1894
Patinated plaster
Private collection

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Dates
From September 22, 2023 to January 7, 2024

Opening times
Mondays (except public holidays): 2 pm to 8 pm
Tuesdays to Saturdays: 11 am to 8 pm
Sundays and public holidays: 11 am to 7 pm
(Last access: 30 minutes before closing time.
Visitors must leave the galleries 10 minutes
before closing time)

Ticket prices
Standard: 5 €
Reduced: 3 €
Free entry: Mondays (except public holidays)

Guided tours
7 €
Times and booking: on this website

Educational visits for schools
Hours and reservations: on this website

Audio guide
4 €. Spanish and English

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Cover: *Ecce Puer*, undated (detail).
Private collection

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