Leo J. O’Donovan

Unmasked

GEORGES ROUault AT BOSTON COLLEGE

When the French artist Georges Rouault died on February 13, 1958, he was given a state funeral and buried at Paris’s beloved St. Germain des Prés. For more than two decades, he had enjoyed growing success, especially with American collectors. The project of his life, Miserere et Guerre, a remarkable series of plates that evokes Goya’s Los Desastres de la Guerra (1813), had finally been published in 1948 and was hailed as a masterpiece. In 1952, a retrospective of his work was held at the Musée National d’Art Moderne as a national tribute. The following year it traveled to the United States and to Japan. For its presentation at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote from Princeton (with perhaps exaggerated French elan) that Rouault’s “present glory is the purest glory a great painter has ever known in his lifetime.”

Soon, though, the glory faded. With the ascendancy of a whole series of new styles, from Pop to Op, Conceptual to Minimalism, Rouault was all but eclipsed. He came to be considered either coarse and histrionic (the early work), or too religious (the later). Now an exhibition at Boston College’s McMullen Museum of Art (“Mystic Masque: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault 1871–1958,” through December 7, 2008), redresses those misjudgments and restores the artist’s achievement. It will be a revelation to a new generation, one that may be more open to figuration and religious concerns.

Curated by Stephen Schloesser of Boston College’s history department, the exhibit of 180 works plays on the twofold meaning of the French word masque, for which English must use two words: the masks people wear as disguises and masque as a form of dramatic performance. The show’s persuasive theme is that throughout his career, Rouault intimated the deeper reality behind the deceptive appearances of human life and found their ultimate depth in the figure of Christ.

Rouault was born in the working-class suburb of Belleville on May 27, 1871, during the final bloody days of the Paris Commune. Some thirty thousand Parisians lost their lives in the upheaval, and Rouault’s own life seems to have been stamped from the beginning by both war and devastation. After an apprenticeship in two stained-glass workshops (between 1885 and 1890), he entered the École des Beaux-Arts, where he studied under the foremost Symbolist painter of the time, Gustave Moreau, becoming his favorite student. (Henri Matisse was a classmate, and the two became lifelong friends.) Rouault was influenced especially by Rembrandt (his grandfather had collected an inexpensive set of Rembrandt’s prints), but also by modern realists like Honoré Daumier and Édouard Manet. He was also drawn to the writings of Gustave Flaubert, Léon Bloy, and Charles Baudelaire, whose Flowers of Evil was on his bedside table.

Several examples of Rouault’s training in the academic salon style are on view in the exhibition, including his first painting, the unfinished Way to Calvary (1891). Moreau’s death in 1898 led to an emotional crisis for the young artist. After spending time at the Benedictine...
Abbey of Ligugé and taking a cure at Évian, Rouault returned to Paris. In 1902 he was named the first conservator of a museum dedicated to Moreau's memory. At about the same time, he experienced a remarkable shift in perception. "Around my thirtieth year," he wrote, "the face of the world changed for me.... I saw everything I saw earlier, but in another form and harmony."

He realized that the filles (prostitutes) who frequented the area near his studio would make fascinating subjects. A breakout series of paintings and oils on paper ensued, the heavy-bodied women having been offered the warmth of the artist's stove in return for posing. What is revealed in the paintings is the women's abused but undeniable humanity. Then, in 1905, Rouault came across "a nomad caravan, parked by the roadside," where the artist noticed an old clown sitting in a corner "mending his sparkling and gaudy costume." Rouault "saw quite clearly that the 'Clown' was me, was us, nearly all of us.... This rich and glittering costume, it is given to us by life itself; we are all more or less clowns, we all wear a glittering costume."

In the exhibition's first great revelatory moment, two of Rouault's clowns (1907) are placed to one side of Christ Mocked (1905). On the other side is a double-sided painting titled Whores (also 1905). All four pieces are done in oil on paper, with wonderfully free brushstrokes and vivid, expressionistic color. The sad entertainers, the women selling themselves, and the assaulted savior are all much more than they initially appear to be—all belong together, and depict the drama of life in its deeper, mystical dimension.

Rouault's classical cast of characters soon became complete. Like Daumier, he visited the Palais de Justice, Paris's courthouse, and there discovered another source of material. He searingly satirized the pretense of venal lawyers and judges. A Bureaucrat, with his crossed eyes, confused expression, and crooked spectacles, is at once absurd and endearing. The Beautiful Helen is smugness itself. Acrobat XIII and To Be Dempsey (a boxer) recall Michelangelo's Dying Slave.

Following the death of his father in 1912, Rouault conceived a project of prints dealing specifically with human suffering. It was to be called Miserere. But with the outbreak of the Great War, he expanded his plan to two folios, each with fifty plates, under the title Miserere et Guerre. (The title alludes to Jacques Callot's 1633 Les Misères de la Guerre, "The Miseries of War.") The folios were to be published by the dealer Ambroise Vollard, with whom Rouault signed an exclusive contract in 1917. Later (1926-27), he created prints for Vollard's attack on colonialism, Reincarnations of Father Ubu, and for Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil.

Thanks to the generosity of the Boston Public Library, visitors to the McMullen exhibit can view twenty superb plates from Miserere, and see them as few others have. The legend for each print appears on one folio page with the image itself on the facing page. Rouault may have intended this design feature as a modern adaptation of Renaissance emblem books, which paired profane and sacred wisdom. Occasionally grouped in diptychs or triptychs in this display, the plates include Rouault's most famous: "Lord, it is you, I recognize you" of 1927; "The blind have sometimes consoled the sighted" of 1926; "There are tears of things..." of 1927, an interpretation of the Orpheus legend, with four "unfinished" variations on the theme hung on the wall above; the cropped crucifixion scene that quotes Pascal, "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world" of 1926; and perhaps most memorable and revealing of all, the sad clown's face "Who does not wear a mask?" of 1923. (From the museum balcony, viewers can see both this plate and an even sadder version of the theme, done in oil in the 1930s.) In fact, throughout the exhibit, the face of Christ recurs.

The Wounded Clown
(1939), Currier Museum of Art

either alone or on the veil of Veronica, providing a delicate continuity to this sustained meditation on sorrow.

Toward the end of the 1920s, a decade devoted almost entirely to his graphic work, Rouault returned to painting. That shift is represented in his exuberant 1928 Singer with a White Plume. Four years later, Vollard published the long-delayed folio Reincarnations, but at the same time halted publication of another, Circus, dear to Rouault. The exhibit's selection of eight aquatints from the latter project indicates that the artist was in a period of transition. The figures are elongated and tightly framed, yet the colors seem more vivid and dramatically contrasted. Schloesser points out that the red balance bar that anchors many of the images suggests equilibrium despite external disorder. It is a pattern that will recur frequently in Rouault's later paintings.

In the autumn of his life, Rouault wrote that he had discovered an internal world that helped him “maintain a certain order and equilibrium.” A new calm seems to have emerged. Emblematic of this new state is a magnificent Holy Face from 1933. This icon-like image uses brilliant color and a painted interior frame that makes the face seem to float flatly on the canvas but moves it out toward the viewer. Rouault's new mood is most personal in a tender Pierrot (1936), and most public in a series of “mythical landscapes” that occupied him for years. Those were troubled times in Europe and the artist's critics were harsh, branding him "the last Romantic." He responded by painting just such a person—most likely himself—a dark figure in profile looking warily at the viewer. In The Wounded Clown (1939), he seems to have found a new depth to old themes: life as a tragic comedy and suffering love as its redeeming grace.

The dealer Pierre Matisse was not among the critics. When The Wounded Clown was shown in New York in the winter of 1940–41, he wrote that it was "probably the greatest work created in our time." A dealer's hyperbole, perhaps, but the comment does indicate an appreciation for a hard-won serenity that overlooked none of life's agony.

Rouault and his family spent World War II in exile in the south of France. After Vollard's death in a car accident in 1939, there began a bitter legal battle between Rouault and the dealer's heirs. They had locked up the artist's work in Vollard's studio. On returning to Paris and finally winning the law suit, in 1948 Rouault publicly burned more than three hundred works, fearing he could never finish them. It was the same year Miserere et Guerre was finally published, though with only 58 of the planned 100 plates. His harsh Profile of a Clown, an unsparing self-study in mortality, was painted that year as well. Despite his age, the war, and his other travails, Rouault had learned to paint women beautiful in repose and even judges who might not be self-interested. His study for a stained-glass crucifixion had far more in common with the windows of Chartres than with the anguish of a Grunewald altarpiece. And in Sarah (1956), perhaps his final work, the mesmerizing head of a woman conveys holy beauty and a sense of celestial vision—a serene finale to the show.

The works on display in “Mystic Masque” have been generously loaned by the Rouault family, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Boston Public Library. The show's massive catalogue, edited by Stephen Schloesser, offers illuminating essays and plates of the works exhibited. Get to Boston, if you possibly can. There is not likely to be a more painfully enthralling and healing exhibition this year.

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