

Seeing Christ in the darkness: Rouault as a graphic artist.

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Georges Rouault (1871-1958) was one of the few modern artists whose work was clearly religious. But though he was a life-long Roman Catholic, his work was anything but Christian in the traditional sense. Too much of it seemed overly gloomy and depressing. Indeed for most of his life the Church resisted the darkness of his work – not until the end of his life did he receive a church commission. But the graphic art in this exhibition, done at the height of the artist's powers, shows how deeply the artist identified with peoples' sufferings and, indeed, discerned within this darkness the saving presence of Christ.

It is appropriate that the focus of this exhibit is on Rouault as printmaker, for it was specially in his graphic work that his religious vision took shape. The major portion of the exhibit is from his *Miserere* series, which he began during the somber days of World War I and finished by 1927. He first drew the images in India ink, and later reproduced them as engravings, reworking the plates over the years – digging deeper with emery paper or file, until the series of 58 plates was finally published in a limited edition in 1948. (Mechanically reproduced versions began to appear soon afterward, beginning in Paris in 1950 and soon in many other countries.) During much of this time he was also working on the prints that finally appeared in another important series, the *Passion*, published by Ambroise Vollard in 1939, with short accompanying texts by Andrés Suarés.

During the 1920's in fact he was almost exclusively engaged with his printmaking, rarely exhibiting his work.

Pondering with his eyes

How is it he came to this anguished view of the human situation? And how was he able to discover there the hope of salvation? Rouault had a small window in his Paris studio where he would stand to watch the unfolding human drama on the streets below. Even these glimpses from his apartment and the explorations during his limited travel, moved him deeply. "One is never finished seeing and watching," he would say. "Our eyes are the door of the spirit and the light of the mind." He was always on the look out for some new range of human experience. As Rouault wrote to his friend Andrés Suarés, who worked with him on the Passion series, "An ever more loving and precise observation of nature will bring me to a more vibrant art...It is impossible for me to isolate myself from the events of the day." The walks he took while on vacation with his friend Claude Roulet consisted of long minutes staring into shop windows, and prolonged pauses as he stopped to pick up some object on the street. Roulet wrote in the introduction to his reflections on the artist: "Rouault was one of the real 'spiritualist' painters of his time, who thought with his hands and in the material, pondering with his eyes."

But the key to his faith, and a major theme of this exhibition, is the hope he was able to find in the suffering that he saw around him. In a 1939 article he reflected on the desperate situation in which so many people live, what he called the “Old District of Unending Pain” (M10). But, given this suffering, why do we not despair? Because, Rouault wrote: “Deep down inside the most unfriendly, unpleasant and impure creature, Jesus dwells.” Here I believe is the key to his faith and also the source of the evident power of his work: in the deepest suffering Jesus is present. Let me show how this theme is developed through the work of this exhibit.

The Poetics of shock

It is well to remember that Rouault was a painter not a theologian. And so for evidence of the artist’s faith one must look at his work. “All I seek,” he confessed, “is the plastic transcription of my emotions.” And so the prints you see in this exhibit have become transcripts of his feelings; they record his distress over what he called the “hard business of living” (see M12). He seemed to understand all this from the inside, as it were, as a participant in life’s difficulties, not simply an observer: As he explained: “I carry within myself an infinite depth of suffering and melancholy, which life has only served to develop and of which my paintings, if God allows it, will only be the flowering and imperfect expression.” This led him to a deep identification with the poor and marginal of society. And his images are often distressing. As his friend Jacques Maritain said, art often

must de-form to get at the nature of things. Look for example at M4, where a father reaches down to encourage his son, entitled “Seek refuge in your heart, poor wanderer”; or the anguished woman in what looks to be a windblown landscape, M43, reminding us: “We must die, and all that is ours.” See the bowed backs of refugees, fleeing their homes with what they can carry – in “Exode/Exile to Babylon” (from the unpublished prints of Miserere). What is striking in Rouault’s portrayal of this human struggle is his sense of the social situation – the ecology, the results in suffering. His artist sensitivities knew the role of bleak suburbs, what he called in M10 “The old district of unending pain,” where a little family huddles beneath a tree that offers little comfort. Or the despair that lived “On the street/little suburb” (the 1929 lithograph from the misc. prints) – where no sun lights the skies.

Layers of meaning

Rouault is able to see these dreary figures without pity or despair because he saw beyond the surface of things. These lonely and despairing figures were part of a larger story; he was able to look into their suffering and see Jesus. In many ways Rouault’s religious faith consisted of a life-long meditation on the incarnation of Christ. What gave him hope was presence of Christ in the midst of life’s vicissitudes. Of his 160 paintings of a religious nature, virtually all of them include some image of Christ. And most of these reflect prolonged meditation on Christ’s humiliation, his suffering. Notice the opening image of the Miserere,

M2, where an outsized bowed head of Christ, with its crown of thorns, is entitled “Jesus humiliated”. This seemed to capture for Rouault the heart of what happened on the cross – Jesus was dishonored and spurned, *like us!* This is why so many of his images of Christ--always in a white tunic, show him in solidarity with his disciples, or the poor, the lonely. See the 1935 Black and White Aquatint “Christ in Faubourg” – Christ walks along with those trapped in this poor neighborhood (the French “Faubourg” denotes that part of the city outside the wall, the poor areas near the factories). Notice Christ’s attentive concern for one who kneels in front of him in “Christ in Conversation” (Woodcut, from the Passion). Or look at “Christ at the Doorway” where his presence brings hope to this non-descript place – a hope that is echoed by the sun that lights the street. At the same time Rouault would bristle at the thought that rich or powerful folk automatically had God on their side; he was incensed that “The well-bred lady thinks she has a reserved seat in heaven” (M16). And he seemed disgusted at the enigmatic image of some bishop who seems so distant: “Far from the smile of Rheims” (M51) – Rheims is the most famous and beautiful of the French cathedrals (an reference that may help account for the dismay his work caused the hierarchy of the Church!) Notice how both these figures have their heads held up – a gesture of pride that Rouault contrasted with the humility of a bowed head. (In this exhibit you will notice how frequently the artist uses gesture and posture to suggest depth of emotion).

The Veil of Veronica

The identification of Christ with human misery is seen centrally, for Rouault, in his death on the cross. In M31 Christ's head is bowed in death as John and the two Marys cover their face in anguish below. The caption "Love one Another" seems like a strange comment on such an event, until one remembers that this awful sacrifice was at the same time the supreme expression of God's love. This point is made powerfully in the final plate of the Miserere M58, where a head of Christ encircled with thorns appears on a cloth and bears the caption (from Is. 53:5): "It is by his wounds that we are healed." Notice the exchange that Rouault is proposing: Jesus takes our wounds, we receive his healing. This exchange is the secret of the atonement for Rouault. It is underlined in the fact that this Face of Christ echoes where a virtually identical image from the Miserere is entitled: "And Veronica with her soft linen still passes along the road" (M33, not included in the show). This refers to the medieval legend of the woman who wiped Jesus face on the way to the cross, and mysteriously is herself transformed into the image of Christ (into, that is, the "true image" – the literal meaning of "veronica"). This veil (or cloth) of Veronica, appearing or referenced in five prints, is what ties the Miserere together. Just as Christ took on our image, Veronica (and potentially all of us) can take on his likeness. So there is an invitation implicit in these images: as Christ identified with the suffering of the world, you, me, all of us are called to go into the darkness. In the same 1939 article where he situated Jesus among the poor, Rouault wrote these lines:

His friends were fishermen
Understood in the best sense;
Clearly he could do no other,
In taking on our suffering,
Than going where it was most severe.

If we follow Jesus, this is where we will go as well. We are called to be like the assistant in the 1936 Aquatint from the Passion, carrying Jesus' cross. This call is expressed most clearly in M35 where Rouault zooms in, as it were, on the torso of Christ hanging on the cross. Below a word of Pascal reads: "He will be in agony until the end of the world..." The phrase is from Pascal's commentary on Matthew 26:36-46 where Jesus asks his disciples to stay awake while he anguishes in prayer; they sleep. Pascal continues the quote above: "He will be in agony... And we must not sleep during that time." Do not sleep while Jesus suffers.

Christ with us

The calling that results from the exchange of images is emphasized also in M30, which shows John baptizing Jesus as the Spirit descends in the form of a dove. It is entitled: "As for us, it is into his death we have been baptized." But this biblical reference from Paul (it is from Romans 6:3) offers an additional aspect of our identification with Christ. For Paul goes on in this passage to say: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was

raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (v. 4). Even if the resurrection is seldom a direct subject, for Rouault the cross always implies the hope of resurrection. Look at M28 where a room filled with skulls opens to a niche with a cross standing on – piercing, a skull. The caption conveys Jesus' words from John 11:25: "He who believes in me, though he be dead, shall live." That Rouault intended to include a resurrection image in the *Miserere* is evident from the cancelled print entitled "Resurrection" or "In every heart well-born, Jesus rises again" (the crossed lines indicate the artist's intention not to publish the print). There Christ comes out of the grave with his hands raised, his face lifted up to heaven. M54 "Arise, you Dead," offers an interesting take on the medieval *danse macabre*, where living persons cavorted with skeletons – in anticipation of their own death. Here the dance is one of life and not death. The reference is clearly to Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones where the Prophet calls for the skeleton's to come to life, as a sign of the promise that God offered his people in exile. We too are exiled, Rouault wants to say, but there is hope for us, even beyond the grave.

I noted that Rouault seldom portrayed the resurrection directly (the cancelled image is only one of two images that I know of), but in another sense the reality of the resurrection is central to his work, especially his later work where the surface of his canvases seems to burst into flames. Critic Jean Grenier has argued that almost all of Rouault's later images of Christ express more his resurrection

than his passion. Consider (31) a vivid aquatint from the *Fleurs du Mal*, done in 1938, where the face expresses a deep confidence, or (38) where a torso of Christ on the cross shows his head held up, in the fashion of an Eastern Orthodox icon, expressing the victory over death won on the cross. But perhaps the clearest example of this Christ of resurrection is the 1936 lithograph of Christ on the cross (41): in this lucid image John and the two Marys no longer cry out, rather they seem to be worshipping – they kneel or look up at the drama unfolding. And, typically, the hope they feel is reflected in the orange-yellow sky behind the cross.

Seeing and Touching the Lord

But there is one final image that I want to use to summarize what Rouault is saying in this exhibition. In various ways, we have seen, these images lay out the human situation of suffering and a savior who shares this suffering. But not everyone recognizes Jesus for who he is; he can be missed. Many look at the poor and outcast and see only despair; they do not see Jesus. Many others look at Jesus and fail to see his suffering love. And it is not always the powerful who see clearly. In M55 not in the exhibit, Rouault ironically portrays a blind person leading one who can see; the caption reads: "Sometimes, the blind have consoled those who see." Similarly notice in M32, it is a blind person who truly sees. Here he reaches out to touch the Lord, saying, "It's you, Lord. I recognize you." How is he recognized? By an interior certainty that is intuited rather than known; by

the Spirit's work in the heart of the believer. From a very different tradition John Calvin describes this same encounter. He writes in words Rouault would affirm: "In Christ we receive the fullness of God. The believing soul recognizes the presence of God indubitably and, as one may say, touches him with his hand (*Institutes*,1,13,13)."

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