

## Georges Rouault's *Miserere et Guerre*

When Georges Rouault (1871-1958) died, exactly fifty years ago this year,<sup>1</sup> his reputation was already beginning to wane. The French artist, whose works had been shown in major retrospective exhibitions at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1945 and 1953, was at one time considered equal in status to his near-exact contemporary and compatriot Henri Matisse (1869-1954). But while Matisse was to become one of the most celebrated artists of the second half of the twentieth century, interest in Rouault gradually declined. This is not surprising given the striking contrasts between their two oeuvres. Matisse's art, vibrant, uplifting, and joyful, proved to be more suited to the hedonistic Post-Modern age than the work of Rouault, which, for the most part, is darkly colored and focused on subjects of evil, sorrow, and suffering.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, its seriousness of purpose and profound spirituality have guaranteed Rouault an enduring following among those who are willing to give his work the critical attention it deserves. They find that, beyond the darkness of Rouault's work, there is light and ultimately a profound love of life and humanity.

Both Matisse and Rouault studied with Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), who stressed that artists should respect their "interior vision."<sup>3</sup> Instead of slavishly copying nature, they should use it as a poet would use a dictionary: to find in it pictorial elements with which to express a feeling or an emotion. While the two young artists both heeded Moreau's lesson, their interior visions were diametrically opposed. Matisse set out to create "an art of balance, of purity and serenity

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<sup>1</sup> The fiftieth anniversary of the artist's death is commemorated not only by this exhibition but also by a large retrospective of the artist's work in the Centre Pompidou in Paris (June 12 - Oct. 13, 2008); by an exhibition called *Mystic Mask: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault* in Boston College's McMullen Museum (Aug. 30 - Dec. 7); and by a retrospective exhibition in the Idemitsu Museum in Tokyo (June 14 - Aug. 17, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The design for a rear cover of the magazine *Verve* in this exhibition (checklist 38) demonstrates that Rouault's work is not always dark and depressing and can be, at times, as uplifting and colorful as the work of Matisse.

<sup>3</sup> See Frank Anderson Trapp, "The Atelier Gustave Moreau," *Art Journal* 22, 2 (Winter 1962-63): 93.

devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter.”<sup>4</sup> He wanted his art to be like a “good arm chair” in which a “mental worker” would feel appeased and mentally soothed.<sup>5</sup> Rouault, on the other hand, felt it was his duty to confront viewers with the dark side of life—with social inequity, the evils of war, pain, and suffering. If Matisse set out to evoke an aesthetic response in the viewer, Rouault angled for an ethical response, for empathy, compassion, and understanding.

Rouault’s artistic inspiration came at once from his profound religiosity and from his reading of the works of the writer Léon Bloy (1846-1917), a convert to Roman-Catholicism, whose central argument was that suffering and deprivation promote spiritual growth. Rouault’s art is conceived in this spirit. In contemplating his sad clowns (6),\* condemned criminals (5), laborers (30), and vagabonds (3), as well as his numerous images of the passion of Christ, we are to respond with profound emotion, through which, in Rouault’s mind, we will grow as human beings.

Rouault’s print series *Miserere et Guerre* (Miserere and War), from which the majority of the works in this exhibition have been selected, was first conceived in 1912 but not printed, in its definitive edition of 450 sets, until 1948. Recapitulating many themes that he had treated earlier in his career and summing up his ideas about life and art, the series may be seen as Rouault’s pictorial legacy to the world. The first part of its title is taken from the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm, which starts with the words, *Miserere mei, Deus*, “Have mercy on me, Lord.” Rouault began thinking about the series in 1912 after the death of his father. The horrific events of World War I (1914-1918) provided a further impetus, and between 1912 and 1918 he made a number of drawings that announced the main theme of the series—suffering and death.

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Matisse, “Notes d’un peintre,” *La Grande Revue*, Dec. 25, 1908. English translation in Herschell Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, University of California Press, 1968, 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

\* Numbers in parentheses refer to the checklist of the exhibition at the end of this catalogue

Though originally he planned to produce two albums of fifty prints each, Rouault, in the end, only completed 58 prints, 33 in the *Miserere* series and 25 in the series about war. All prints are accompanied by short poetic texts in French or Latin. Some are of the artist's own making, others are culled from the Bible or the classics.<sup>6</sup> The texts enlarge the meaning of the pictures. The words *Qui ne se grime pas?* or "Who does not paint his face?" accompany the image of a sad clown's face (6) suggesting that, in the public arena, we all hide our private selves. A print showing a young boy seated on his mother's lap is titled by a quote from the Odes of Horace (I, 1, 24), *Bella matribus detestata*, "Wars, Dread of Mothers"(24).

At first glance, the *Miserere et Guerre* prints strike us by their apparent simplicity. Printed in black ink on white paper, they generally show no more than one or two figures, drawn in thick black outlines that may well appear crude. On closer inspection, however, the prints are quite complex. Executed in an unorthodox process that combines etching, aquatint, dry point, and engraving, they exhibit a great richness of tonal nuance. Ranging from jet black to pure white, they seem to be suffused with light, which is now glaringly bright, as in *Le condamné s'en est allé* (The Prisoner is Led Away; 10), then dusky and ominous, as in *Au pays de la soif et de la peur* (In the Land of Thirst and Terror;14). As a boy, Rouault was apprenticed to a stained glass maker and his *Miserere* prints, with their subtle tonal gradations, often strike us by their similarity to early twentieth-century black-and-white photographs of stained glass windows.

Like windows in a medieval church, Rouault's *Miserere et Guerre* prints form a loosely sequenced ensemble in which the individual parts stand on their own but at the same time enrich and complement one another. Scenes of suffering and death are a foil for images of hope and love in such prints as *Chantez Matines, le jour renaît* (Sing Matins, A New Day is Born (17), *Il serait si doux d'aimer* (To Love Would Be So Sweet; 9), or *Se réfugie en ton coeur, va-nu-pieds de*

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<sup>6</sup>Of the Latin titles, for example, *Sunt lacrymae rerum* (16) is derived from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book I, line 462); and *De profundis* (28) from the beginning of Psalm 130. Several of the French titles are derived from the Bible as well, such as "Il a été maltraité et opprimé et il n'a pas ouvert la bouche" (21), which is a quote from Isaiah 53:7 and "Celui qui croit en moi, fût-il mort, vivra,"(17), which comes from John 11:25.

*Malheur* (Take Refuge in Your Heart, Poor Vagabond; 3). This punctuation of *Miserere et Guerre* by positive images, makes it clear that ultimately Rouault's series, and his art in general, is not defeatist and dark but imbued with a profoundly humanitarian sentiment. Love and compassion are the subtext of his oeuvre. Or, as the artist wrote himself, in answer to those who criticized him for the emphasis on death, misery, and sin in his work, "They [the critics] have never understood the depth of my thought towards this humanity that I seem to mock."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Rouault, *Soliloques* (Neuchâtel, 1944). Translation in Holly Flora and Soo Yun Kang, *This Anguished World of Shadows: George Rouault's Miserere et Guerre* (London: D. Giles and New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2006), 41.