



MEDARDO ROSSO

PIONEER OF MODERN SCULPTURE

Fundación
MAPFRE

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PIONEER OF MODERN SCULPTURE

Dates: From September 22 to January 8

Address: Fundación MAPFRE
Paseo de Recoletos, 23. Madrid

Curator: Gloria Moure

Exhibition organized in collaboration with the Medardo Rosso Museum

MUSEO
MEDARDO ROSSO

Communication Fundación MAPFRE

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Cover image:
Medardo Rosso
Ecce Puer [Behold the Child], c. 1920
Patinated plaster
Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio
© Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio

SUMMARY

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.

BIOGRAPHY

The son of a stationmaster, Domenico Rosso, and of Luigia Bono, Medardo Rosso was born in Turin in 1858. While still a boy he rejected his family's intentions that he also work for the railway and soon began to study drawing while also becoming an apprentice to a marble carver. Having completed his military service, in 1882 Rosso entered the Brera Fine Arts Academy but his revolutionary political ideas and opposition to official teaching methods led to his expulsion. This did not, however, prevent him from participating in exhibitions in various Italian cities and in London and Vienna. In 1889 he moved to Paris where he established contacts with some of the city's leading artists and intellectuals.

Rosso exhibited five works in the Italian pavilion at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1900, while in 1904 he showed various works at the Autumn Salon, which he juxtaposed with photographs of sculptures by Auguste Rodin. For some years critics had been discussing which of the two artists was responsible for the renewal of sculpture, encouraging a rivalry which led to Rosso being overshadowed in terms of public reputation due to Rodin's key position in the official art world.

In 1920 the artist returned permanently to Milan where his work started to enjoy some success due to the support of prominent figures such as Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Ardengo Soffici and Margherita Sarfatti.

Medardo Rosso died as a consequence of diabetes on 31 March 1928 in Milan. A bronze version of his sculpture *Ecce Puer* was installed on his tomb.

In 1929 his only child, Francesco (born in Milan in 1885) proposed a museum to house his father's works in a 17th-century building in Barzio near Lake Como. This is now the Museo Medardo Rosso.

KEYS TO THE EXHIBITION

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.

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.

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.

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."

THE EXHIBITION

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.

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.

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.

SELECTION OF SCULPTURAL GROUPS

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.



Medardo Rosso
Impressione d'omnibus [Impression of an Omnibus]
Gelatin silver print
Private collection

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.



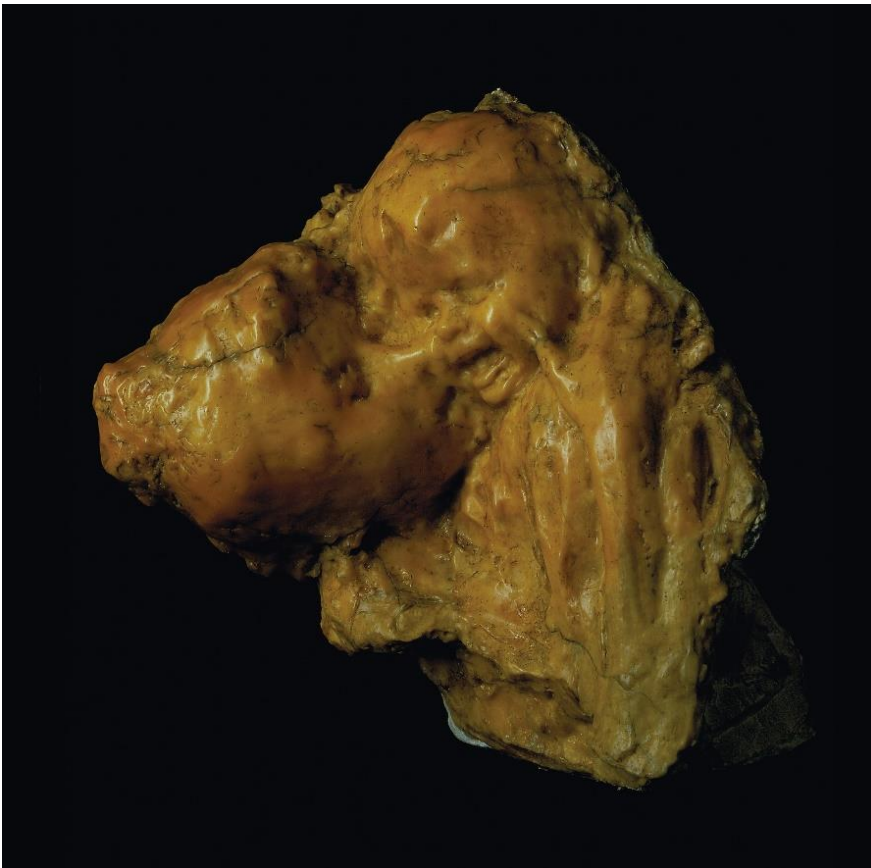
Medardo Rosso
Bookmaker, 1894
Patinated plaster
Private collection

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.



Medardo Rosso
Aetas Aurea [The Golden Age], undated
Wax on plaster
Courtesy Amedeo Porro Fine Arts, Lugano / London
© Amedeo Porro Fine Arts Lugano / London

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 *Torso* 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 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 and dark in the sculpture.

Medardo Rosso
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

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.



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

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."



Medardo Rosso
Ecce Puer [Behold the Child], undated
Modern print from an original glass negative
Private collection

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 in which, however, an apparent tension and lack of communication seems to prevail. 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.



Medardo Rosso
Conversazione in giardino [The Conversation in the Garden], 1896-1897
Bronze
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Roma
© Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Roma

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue which includes reproductions of all the works on display. It also features essays by the exhibition's curator, Gloria Moure, and the art and architectural historian Maria Elena Versari. The comparative chronology has been prepared by Carlos Martín. The publication is completed with a selection of texts by Medardo Rosso himself and most of the letters written by the artist over the course of his lifetime to friends, collectors and admirers of his works.

Available in Spanish and English editions, the catalogue is published by Fundación MAPFRE in collaboration with Polígrafa.

INFORMATION

Fundación MAPFRE

Paseo Recoletos 23, 28004 Madrid

Tel: 915 81 61 00 (Attention only during the opening hours of the exhibition hall)

cultura@fundacionmapfre.org

OPENING HOURS:

Mondays (except holidays): 2 pm – 8 pm

Tuesday to Saturday: 11 am – 8 pm

Sunday and holidays: 11 am – 7 pm

AUDIOGUIDES

Available online in Spanish and English. Accessible via mobile without downloads or installations.

Also available in audio device obtainable in the hall (if available).