About Georges Rouault

Born in working-class Paris in 1871, Rouault was apprenticed as a youth to a stained glass workshop. In 1890, he entered the École des Beaux-Arts, where he studied under Gustave Moreau. Yet he remained outside of the group movements that dominated art in the twentieth century, developing a focused, persistent artistic vision influenced by his strong affinity for the medieval period and expressed in a variety of media. He became a highly regarded figure in France, and was given a state funeral upon his death in 1958.

“Aggressive, sparse, grandiose” . . . and eloquent

The prints on display were originally commissioned by Rouault’s powerful Parisian art dealer, Ambroise Vollard. The project was conceived as two volumes, titled Miserere and Guerre, to be made up of 100 large etchings accompanied by text by poet André Suarès. Rouault developed the majority of the images between 1914 and 1918—the years of World War I. His initial ink and gouache sketches were transferred to copper plates. Rouault reworked the plates continuously between 1922 and 1927, noting,

I worked unceasingly on each plate, with varying success, using many different tools. . . . Dissatisfied, I reworked the plates again and again, sometimes making as many as twelve to fifteen successive states; for I wished them as far as possible to be equal in quality.

The books never materialized, but 58 images were printed in an edition of 450 in 1927. Vollard later had the plates canceled so that no further prints could be made. However, due to Vollard’s untimely death in 1939 and Rouault’s legal struggles with Vollard’s heirs, the etchings were not published until 1948. Given the title Miserere, they were recognized as a milestone in expanding the technical and expressive range of the print.

Perhaps more than anything, Rouault’s devout Roman Catholic faith was the guiding if unstated principle of his art, leading to his persistent concern with the twin themes of humanity’s frailty and redemption. Rouault himself said, “All of my work is religious for those who know how to look at it,” and Miserere et Guerre is in many senses a comprehensive expression of Rouault’s religious vision. The works lament the evils of the modern world, juxtaposing society’s predators with its downtrodden. In the series Rouault addresses many of the themes that prevail throughout his work: brutality; degradation; hatred; injustice and judicial corruption; loneliness; poverty and hunger; the destructiveness of war; and—counterbalancing it all—compassion.

Born out of the unprecedented violence of the First World War and Rouault’s intense compassion for the marginalized and underprivileged, Miserere et Guerre stands as a singular achievement in the realms of printmaking and religious art. Seldom exhibited in their entirety, these works continue to speak forcefully and poignantly in our present times, and can be appreciated for their technical achievement, stark beauty, human insight, and spiritual integrity. MOCRA is pleased to invite audiences to experience this major body of work by one of the twentieth century’s master artists.
Selections from Georges Rouault, Miserere et Guerre. Images © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Clockwise, from upper left:
No. 42, Bella matribus detestata (“Wars, detested by mothers.”) Horace, Odes, I, 1, 24/5, 1922.
No. 36, Ce sera la dernière, petit père! (This will be the last time, little father!), 1927.
No. 57, “Obéissant jusqu’à la mort et à la mort de la croiz.” (“Obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”) Philippians 2:8, 1926.
No. 47, “De profundis ...” (“Out of the depths ...”) Psalm 130:1, 1927.