THE REDEMPTIVE VISION OF GEORGES ROUAULT

SEPTEMBER 9 — OCTOBER 26, 2008
WALSH GALLERY
The Redemptive Vision of Georges Rouault

Jeanne Brasile, Curator
Walsh Gallery, Seton Hall University

The artwork selected for this exhibit demonstrates the artist’s enduring belief in the power of redemption and compassion in times of uncertainty and war. Born in a basement where his mother sought refuge from shelling during the Franco-Prussian War, the artist remained forever haunted and influenced by his difficult childhood which was marked by poverty, suffering and hardship. Suffering remained an integral part of his life, defined by the difficulties of living through two more wars as an adult. This exhibition conveys Rouault’s spiritual legacy of faith and the central concept of redemption, which was strongly influenced by his Catholic identity and beliefs.

Suffering, whether evoked by images of Christ on the crucifix or secular themes of peasants, prostitutes and the impoverished, reveals Rouault’s empathy for his subjects and persistent belief in the power of suffering to lead us to salvation. Rouault’s message of hope and compassion are especially poignant today as we face similar events, perhaps offering a way for us to reconcile the struggles we face in contemporary times. Despite the hardships faced by Rouault in his lifetime, he remained staunchly optimistic, buoyed by his religious faith. Finding hope and love in a seemingly dark world, Rouault’s artistic legacy provides a thoughtful opportunity to view our own experiences through a similarly positive framework, encouraging us to endure hardships, seek goodness, and ultimately—redemption.

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Monsignor Richard M. Liddy
Director, Center for Catholic Studies
Seton Hall University

When I was a young student here at Seton Hall in the 1950’s, wrestling with my own vocation to be a priest, it seemed like all the best literature and art came from France. As I read the writers who made up the Catholic Renaissance of the time, it seemed that most of them were French: Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, Léon Bloy, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel and others. These authors seemed to plumb the depths of a people whose lives had so recently been ravaged by terrible wars; and yet in their midst were lives deeply touched by religious faith. It was at that time that I read René Voillaume’s The Seeds of the Desert that recounted the life of Charles de Foucauld, who had recovered his own Catholic faith through his encounter with Moslem people of the Sahara. I also read the French philosophers, Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain who found in artistic creativity a human openness to the divine. In fact, Maritain’s Art and Scholasticism featured the paintings of his friend, Georges Rouault.

Recently, Stephen Schloesser’s Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Post-war Paris 1919-1933 has uncovered in detail the broad historical story of this period in French Catholicism and what I found so intriguing as a young person in the midst of the twentieth century. The people of France had lived through terrible sufferings and something had happened to their soul. For some, perhaps, these sufferings had only confirmed a secularism and nihilism, but for others deep meaning was found right in the midst of suffering.

Georges Rouault fits into that framework. Born into a poor Catholic family in the midst of the Franco-Prussian war, he developed a distinct artistic style that was quite modern, and at the same time deeply religious. In his etchings and painting of the poor, the lonely and the condemned he sought to express a universal human experience. That experience can be discerned in the experience of that first century Jew of whom it was said, “Tax collectors and prostitutes were all gathering around him and the Pharisees complained, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'”

The philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) once noted that redemption is not a category unique to Christianity. The longing for redemption can be found in the seemingly most profane of places: in the displacement and immigrations of peoples and families, in prisons, and in the lives of women abandoned and lonely. But in a Christian context that longing for redemption takes on a new meaning: it does not promise the elimination of all evil but it does set it within a new context: the context of divine love. Paul’s admonition, “Do not return evil for evil but overcome evil with good,” demands taking evil seriously and at the same time it demands being open to God’s love in that very place. It seems that this is what Georges Rouault sought to do throughout his work. He sought to express, through color and form and emphasis, the deep sorrow of this world transformed only through an even deeper love. His passionate vision is also joyful. In the words of his friend, Léon Bloy, in the novel, The Woman Who Was Poor, “Here the only unhappiness is not to be one of the saints.”
Georges Rouault’s *Miserere et Guerre*

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When Georges Rouault (1871-1958) died, exactly fifty years ago this year,1 his reputation was already beginning to wane. The French artist, shoes 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.2 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.”3 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 devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter.”4 He wanted his art to be like a “good arm chair” in which a “mental worker” would feel appeased and mentally soothed.5 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 suffering and deprivation to 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* (Misery and War), from which the majority of the works in this exhibition have been selected, was completed between 1922 and 1927, but not printed and published, it is definitive edition of four hundred and fifty 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 51st Psalm, which starts with the words, *Miserere mei, Deus*—“Have Mercy on me, Lord.” Rouault may have begun thinking about the series as early as 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.

Though originally he planned to produce two albums of fifty prints each, Rouault, in the end, only completed fifty eight prints, thirty three in the *Miserere* series and twenty five 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.6 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 an 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 cœur, va-nu-pieds de 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 dart, but imbued with a profoundly humanitarian sentiment. Love and compassion are the subtext of his *œuvre*. 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 on the depth of my thought towards this humanity that I seem to mock.”7
Chronology

1871 Born May 27
1885 Apprentices with stained glass masters Hirsch and Tamoni
Enrolls in evening classes at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs
1891 Enrolls at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts
Shows for the first time at the French Salon, official art exhibition of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts
1892 Begins studies with artist Gustave Moreau
1898 Death of Gustave Moreau. Becomes conservator of the Musée Gustave Moreau
1903 First Salon d’Automne organized by Georges Rouault, André Derain, Henri Matisse and Albert Marquet as a reaction to the conservative policies of the French Salon
1904 Meets Léon Bloy, novelist, essayist, pamphleteer and poet. His works reflect a deep devotion to the Roman Catholic Church and greatly influenced Rouault’s spiritual growth
1905 Exhibition at Salon d’Automne with Fauvists
1908 Marries Marthe le Sidaner
1910 First solo exhibition at Galerie Druet
1912 Death of Rouault’s father
1912-18 Begins preliminary drawings for the print series Miserere et Guerre
1914 World War I begins
1917 Ambrose Vollard, art dealer/publisher, purchases all of Rouault’s paintings, both finished and unfinished. Becomes Rouault’s exclusive dealer
1919 First painting acquired by a museum—Musée des Unterlinden, Colmar, France
1922-27 During this time, completes the print series Miserere et Guerre
1937 Rouault exhibits paintings at Paris World’s Fair to great acclaim
1939 World War II begins
1945 Rouault exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York
1947 Rouault successfully sues Vollard’s estate for return of over eight hundred paintings
1948 Miserere et Guerre first printed and published
1951 Receives the rank of Commander of the Legion of Honor, the highest decoration in France
1951 Retrospective exhibitions on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the County Museum of Los Angeles, and the Cleveland Museum of Art
1958 Dies at age eighty-six. First artist in history to be given a state funeral by the French government

Endnotes

1. The fiftieth anniversary of the artist’s death is commemorated no only by this exhibition but also by a large retrospective of his work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (June 12-October 13, 2008); by an exhibition entitled “Mystic Masque: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault” at Boston College’s McMullem Museum (Aug.30-Dec. 7, 2008); and by a retrospective exhibition in the Idemitsu Museum in Tokyo (June 14-Aug. 17, 2008).

2. 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 time, as uplifting and colorful as the work of H. Matisse.


5. Ibid.

6. 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


* numbers in parentheses refer to the checklist of the exhibition at the end of this publication.
Catalogue of the Exhibition

Part I — Miserere et Guerre
Designed 1912-1918, 1922-1927; published 1948
Etching, drypoint and aquatint
Collection of The Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO

MISERERE

1. Plate 1 - Miserere Mei, Deus [Have mercy on me God], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The angelic face and crossed olive branches perhaps denote the peaceful, remote encouragement of Heaven, from which a sorrowing Christ seems excluded.

2. Plate 2 - Jésus Honni [Jesus reviled], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The presence of the crown of thorns intensifies the impact of Christ’s sorrow and explicitly evokes His Passion.

3. Plate 4 - Se Réfugie en Ton Coeur, Va-Nu-Pieds De Malheur [Seek refuge in your Heart, poor wanderer], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Pilgrimage, or wandering, as an allegory of the Christian seeking salvation may have been the inspiration for this image of a weary traveler, perhaps more immediately based on the displaced citizens of France in the First World War.

4. Plate 5 - Solitaire, En Cette Vie D’Embûches Et De Malices [Alone in this life of snares and malice], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Without the faith of Christianity, humankind appears doomed to isolation, insecurity, and despair.

5. Plate 6 - Ne Sommes-Nous Pas Pourfauts? [Are we not convicts?], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
This striving, sorrowing figure suggests perhaps the soul restricted by corporeality or, given Rouault’s strong social consciousness, the oppression of humanity by its own institutions.

6. Plate 8 - Qui Ne Se Grime Pas? [Who does not wear a mask?], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The ambiguity of a melancholy clown was a theme already exploited in the first years of the century by Picasso.

7. Plate 11 - Demain Sera Beau, Disait Lenauf Ragé [Tomorrow will be beautiful, said the shipwrecked man], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Both the title and the image stress the sustaining optimism and hope of humanity.

8. Plate 12 - Le Dur Métier De Vivre [It is hard to live], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The title gives an unpleasant sense of irony to the apparent age of the figure which, however, conveys resignation more than despair.

9. Plate 13 – Il Serait Si Doux D’Aimer [It would be so sweet to love], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Again, Rouault hesitates to accept a full untrammeled love, so well evoked by the classic mother and child of the image, by his choice of “would” (serait) in the title.

10. Plate 18 – Le condamné s’en Est Allé [The condemned man went away], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The identification of humankind in its vulnerability and grief with Christ, is trenchantly made here bay the pose of the figure which is derived from representations of the Mocking of Christ.

11. Plate 20 – Sous Un Jésus En Croix Oublié Là [Under a Jesus forgotten on a cross], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
One of the strongest and yet traditional images of the entire series, this Crucifixion alludes to the roadside shrines of rural, devout France, as well as to the French laws of December 1905, according to which all crucifixes had to be removed from all court rooms.

12. Plate 21 - Il A Eté Maltraité Et Opprimé Et Il N’A Pas Ouvert La Bouchetin — 32¼ x 26 ¼
[He has been mistreated and oppressed and He has not opened His mouth], 1948
A comparison with plate no. 18 shows how closely Rouault equated Christ and humanity.

13. Plate 24 – Hiver Lèpre De La Terre [Winter, earth’s leper], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
In a particularly grim fashion, Rouault here establishes a parallel between the winter’s white mantle of snow and ashen white discoloration of human skin, attacked by leprosy.

14. Plate 26 – Au Pays De La Soif Et De La Peur [In the land of thirst and fear], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
A dream world of faintly ominous character, this print was evidently strongly influenced by the famous painting, The Poor Fisherman, by France’s great symbolist painter Puvis de Chavannes.

15. Plate 27 – Sunt Lacrymae Rerum [There are tears in things], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Virgil’s Aeneid provided the title for this image of Orpheus, the great singer of classical mythology whose loss of his beloved Eurydice and trials to regain her must have offered to Rouault’s mind an interesting comment on the Christian’s difficult progress toward salvation.
16. Plate 28 – Celui Qui Croit En Moi, Fût-Il Mort, Vivra [He who believes in Me, though he be dead, shall live], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
One of the series’ most unnerving images, this charnel house is redeemed by the conspicuous cross.

17. Plate 29 – Chantez Matines, Le Jour Renaît [Sing mornings, day is reborn], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The mood shifts dramatically here from the gloom of the preceding plate to exulting joy as a Divinity suggests itself in the most benign aspects of the natural world.

18. Plate 30 – Nous...c’est En Sa Mort Que Nous Avons Été Baptisés [We...it is in His death that we have been baptized], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼ — This representation of the baptism of Christ by St. John conforms almost entirely to a traditional composition.

19. Plate 31 – Aimez-Vous Les Uns Les Autres [Love one another], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Again, the composition derives from typical and venerable traditions of representation.

20. Plate 32 – Seigneur, C’est Vous, Je Vous Reconnais [Lord, it is You, I know You], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The act of physical recognition here undoubtedly symbolizes the essential Christian act of accepting Christ as the means to salvation.

21. Plate 33 – Et Véronique, Au Tendre Lin Passe Encore Sur Le Chemin [And Veronica, with her gentle cloth, still passes on the way], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼ — The impression of Christ’s face on the cloth offered by Veronica to Him on the way to Calvary has traditionally provided artists with the most direct opportunity to create their own idea of Christ’s appearance.

GUERRE

22. Plate 34 – Les Ruines Elle-Mêmes Ont Péri [Even the ruins have been destroyed], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
With this plate, Rouault introduced the sequence dealing with war which is here symbolized by the death’s head wearing a helmet.

23. Plate 35 – Jésus Sera En Agonie Jusqu’à La Fin Du Monde [Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Rouault seems to make the subtle point that such activities as war impede the realization of the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice, thus protracting His Passion in a metaphysical sense.

24. Plate 42 – Bella Matribus Detestata [War, hated by mothers], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The virtually classical image of maternity is here made acutely poignant by the apt and chilling quotation used as the plate’s title.

25. Plate 44 – Mon Doux Pays, Où Etes-Vous? [My sweet country, where are you?], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Order, urbanity, and society are mocked by soldiers hugging the ground in an attempt to avoid the worst consequences of a bombarding.

26. Plate 47 – De Profundis [Out of the depths], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
The dead warrior lies under the aegis of Christ, again represented by the surrogate in the form of Veronica’s veil, while parliamentarians argue in the background.

27. Plate 56 – En Ces Temps Noirs De Jactance Et D’Incroyance, Notre-Dame De La Fin Des Terres Vigilante [In these times of vanity and disbelief, Our Lady of Land’s end keeps Match], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
“Land’s end” probably refers to Brittany where a profound if simple faith would have persisted into the twentieth century, and from where Rouault’s father had originated.

28. Plate 57 – Obéissant Jusqu’à La Mort Et A la Mort De La Croix [Obedient unto death and to death on the cross], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼ — While the image is again of the most conventional sort, the title draws a parallel to the unquestioning acceptance of fate by both the soldier and all men.

29. Plate 58 – C’est Par Ses Meurtrissures Que Nous Somme Guéris [It is by His wounds that we are healed], 1948 — 32¼ x 26 ¼
Once more, Christ’s image in the Veil of Veronica appears as the leitmotif of the later plates of the series in which it seems to function as a sustaining vision and inspiration.

Part II—Additional Works

30. Paysans [Peasants], 1935— from the Passion Series, Plate 2 - Color aquatint — 24¾ x 18½
Goodwin-Ternbach Museum, Queen College, Flushing, N.Y— Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Norbert Schimmel, 60.44

31. Christ et la Sainte Femme [Christ and the Holy Woman], 1935— original color and aquatint — 21 3/5 x 17 3/5
Spaightwood Galleries, Upton, MA

32. Ecce Dolor [Behold Sorrow], 1936— color lithograph — 22 3/8 x 18 1/2
Collection of Antanas and Joana Vaiciulaitis, loaned by Danute Nourse.

33. Sainte Pute [Saint Pute], 1936— from the Passion Series, Plate 12 —color aquatint — 24¾ x 19
Goodwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, Flushing, N. Y.—Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Norbert Schimmel, 60.46

34. Couverture II Pour Verve 4 [Cover for the Magazine Verve, Vol. 4], 1938—original color lithograph
Spaightwood Galleries, Upton, MA

35. Lighthouse, The New Yorker magazine cover, April 19, 1969
Courtesy of the Walsh Gallery and University Libraries, Seton Hall University, So. Orange, N.J
This publication accompanies the exhibition

**The Redemptive Vision of Georges Rouault**

on display at the Walsh Gallery from September 8—October 26, 2008

**SYMPOSIUM**

GEORGES ROUAULT AND THE ART OF SACRED ENGAGEMENT

Saturday, September 27, 2008, 2-5 pm — contact: Center for Catholic Studies: 973.275.2525
Featuring Speakers:
Soo Yun Kang, Chicago State University
Terrence Dempsey, SJ, St. Louis University
Stephen Schloesser, SJ, Boston College

**CLOSING LECTURE**

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**CHAGALL AND ROUAULT**

Sunday, October 26, 2008, 2-4 pm — contact: Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies: 973.761-9751
Rev. Fr. Lawrence Frizzell, Director, Judaeo-Christian Studies

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*Director, Center for Catholic Studies*

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**FRONT COVER:**
Georges Rouault
*Miserere et Guerre — Plate 13*
*Il Serait Si Doux d’Aimer [To Love Would Be So Sweet],* Etching
Designed 1912-1918, 1922-1927, published 1948
32¼ x 28¼
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis, MO
©2008 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris
“It is not the worldly eclecticism of multiple knowledge that enriches, but perseverance in a favorable furrow and the loving, silent effort of a whole life.”

Georges Rouault, February 1945